

**'tis the damn season**

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# 'tis the damn season

by [moonymoment](#)

## Summary

“Where are you going?”

Remus turns. Sirius looks delightful; wine-flush and December drizzle painting his pale, pretty face the deepest carmine red. His spindly hands are twiddling at his front, as if he doesn't know quite what to do with them. He sniffs, and exhales corporeal ice that sends a shiver running down Remus' spine. He's not sure if it's from the cold or the alcohol or... something else.

*and it always leads to you, and my hometown*

## Notes

this was going to be short and sweet, >15k, so obviously it turned out to be 50k and counting... buckle in folks for the most self-indulgent fluffy little christmassy idiots u will ever see xxxx dedicated to my loves pesty and hannah who have been listening to me updating them on the scarily increasing word count for the past two weeks <3

## i

This is it. This is the end. The world is about to implode from the inside out. The ridiculous prediction of the world ending catastrophically in 2012 is coming a decade late. The sun has just gone out and in T-minus eight minutes the world will be plunged into darkness and the woes of Remus Lupin will be no more.

He takes a deep breath. He knocks on the door.

“Come in,” comes the cheery bellow from inside - really, Remus had no chance of avoiding it even if he could, for the door to *his* classroom definitely has a little window and there is definitely a group of Year 11 girls staring at him through it, wondering whether they should tell their teacher that his fellow staff member is loitering like some strange Santa standing on the streets ringing a bell and begging for your children’s money.

He takes a deep breath, and pushes the door open. Twenty eyes fall upon him.

Sirius Black is in the midst of pinning something Tudor-related up on his display board, while his students are copying something down from the projector, except Tilly and Ciara have turned their chairs around to talk to Dan who is sitting behind him, pens abandoned, and Izzy has turned her worksheet into a paper aeroplane and is aiming it at the back of Christopher’s unsuspecting curl-ridden head. Izzy is in Remus’ form and he has Christopher next period after break for English.

She locks eyes with him and he gives her a brief form-tutor-esque glare; the paper aeroplane is smoothed out. An attack has been thwarted. For now.

Sirius turns, and a bright smile careens over his shit-eating face. (Remus almost grabs Izzy’s sheet, ghosts of the aeroplane folds smooth over his calloused fingers, to re-form and poke his fucking eyes out with it.)

“Mr. Lupin!” Sirius exclaims, pushing the last red pin into what Remus can now see is a student-made map of sixteenth century England, gold star stamped onto the corner where Sirius has evidently marked it; he turns and the corner flops a little, but he doesn’t seem to notice. “How may I assist?”

Remus takes a deep breath in. He has only taken one step into the classroom. He daren’t go further.

Izzy is laughing at him. His annoyance must be clear on his face. He makes a real attempt to smooth it out, clears his throat, and says;

“Do you have a hole puncher?”

Sirius raises an eyebrow.

“A hole puncher?”

“Yes.”

“As in,” Sirius continues, and *oh my god*, Remus is going to throttle him, “the device that punches barbaric holes into unsuspecting pieces of paper?”

Remus can see Tilly snickering out of the corner of his eye, all afflictions with Dan ceased. (He’s looking a little glum. Remus can’t imagine why.)

“My Year 11s are doing folder content next period, so yes. The hole puncher. That punches holes. To put sheets of paper into the ring binder. Do you have one?”

“*More* sheets?” Christopher chimes in, and Remus narrows his eyes at him. “Sir, my folder is already bursting.”

“Innit,” Izzy interjects, and Remus finds *that* quite rich to be honest, because he doesn’t even teach her outside of form. He makes a mental note to ask Miss. Adisa if she would like to share his worksheets for Macbeth, for the sheer satisfaction of knowing Izzy spoke it into being.

“GCSE’s, Chris,” Remus says, dryly. “Unless you want Shakespeare to rise from the grave and tutor you himself, my sheets are the best you’ve got.”

Sirius is sitting at his desk, now, grinning. His mop of curls is pulled back into a ponytail, loose strands falling by his face, and his hands are ink stained. He's wearing a pink shirt and chinos that fit him extraordinarily well in comparison to Remus', which always seem to be a little bit too short.

There is a moment of silence in which Chris rolls his eyes, but it's a jokey eye roll and he's smiling, so Remus doesn't reprimand him, because he can take a fucking joke.

What he *can't* take is Sirius. And his lack of hole puncher searching.

"Mr. Black," Remus prompts, and he raises his eyebrows.

"Mm?"

"Hole puncher."

"Ah," Sirius says, as if he forgot - he absolutely did not - and he begins rummaging around his desk. There's a stack of mock exams that he almost knocks over, but he catches at the last minute, and he accidentally shoves a pack of three neon highlighters onto the floor but doesn't seem to notice - or care. He comes up empty.

"Alright, who has the hole puncher?" Sirius asks the classroom at large; the students begin looking around avidly to see who the culprit is. Chris actually turns out his pockets, acting dumb; which Remus doesn't really understand until he sees Izzy giggling at him, and, well. That makes sense.

Tilly is the culprit. She had dropped it, accidentally, while trying to punch holes in her booklet to fit into her binder. It's passed like a boat on a wave from the back of the classroom to the front, and Sirius takes it from a rather anxious girl called Eden, who grins when he thanks her. It is the most expression Remus has ever seen on her face.

Sirius offers it to him, and Remus has to take another three steps into his classroom to retrieve it, which he does not like much.

“Thank you,” he says, out of courtesy, and Sirius doesn’t reply. Just smiles. That stupid smile that says “*You owe me now*” and “*Next time you complain about the noise from my classroom I’m going to remind you of my benevolent behaviours*” and “*I’m going to make your academic career hell.*”

Remus leaves. He can’t be bothered.

Back in his classroom, he sighs as he falls into his desk chair. He’s been up the stairs entirely too many times today (*four*, actually, courtesy of people who keep bloody needing him when he doesn’t want to be needed) and he can feel the ache in his knees, so, to distract himself, he gets a move on with the hole puncher and the wad of sheets in the corner of his desk, placed idly next to the huge pile of mock exams that he has to have marked and done and returned for feedback in a week and a half when the kids break up for Christmas. He absolutely has not started on them and is behind on too many lesson plans to even *think* about starting on them until this weekend, which will then give him only a week to get them marked and done and returned, and his last Year 11 class is on Thursday as well so that’s a week *minus* one day which is, quite honestly, not enough time whatsoever.

Yet here he is. Punching holes into sheets of paper. Being irritated with the hole puncher. With the residue on it. With who it belongs to.

*Look*, he is twenty eight years old. Twenty nine in March. He’s a grown, adult man, with grown, adult responsibilities and priorities and a grown, adult brain that he uses and shares with sets upon sets of small, developing child brains on a day-to-day basis, and he loves the kids he teaches. He does; truly, even if his Tuesday 9am Year 8’s are the bane of his existence and his Friday last period Year 11’s couldn’t pay attention to the board if it got up and slapped them round the face; he loves it. His brain is all taken up with teaching, lesson plans and research and academic papers that he has to submit by deadlines that he cannot reach and yet he *does*, because he always seems to succeed, eventually, even if the entire world and all of the planets are against him; he’s an optimist. Despite everything, Remus Lupin, Mr. Lupin, your resident university student’s fond memory of their secondary school English Lit teacher who wore jumpers when the rest of his prissy private school staff members wore suits, is an optimist. And this

is why he's not worried about the mock exam papers. He'll get them done. It'll stress his little bones out until they crumble, but he'll get them done.

But his grown, adult, optimist brain has to have a mortal coil, and that mortal coil is Sirius Black.

It's stupid. They're not enemies. It's *not* a rivalry (not since that one time they were both submitting papers at the same time to be used in a Keynote humanities speech at the University of Gloucester, and Sirius "accidentally" turned off his computer at the plug after an extended period of no saving and Remus "accidentally" stole his memory stick for five days and wouldn't give it back); it's more of a... petty sort of mutual dislike. He has to work with him and see him five days a week and he has for two years, now, and it has gotten to the point that yes, Remus having to ask him for a hole puncher is a big deal, because it makes Sirius feel like he's got the one up on him until one fateful day in the near-future in which Sirius runs out of permission slips for the Year 7 residential trip down to Brighton and he has to ask Remus; to which Remus will smile as smugly as he possibly can and pull one out and childishly yank it away when Sirius reaches out to grab it. Because he has a grown, adult brain that does grown, adult things 90% of the time, but everyone needs a break from adulting, and so you *must* forgive him for the bout of pettiness that *will* occur on that fateful day that Remus gets the upper hand once more.

He scowls at the hole puncher. It seems to scowl back.

He gets all of the sheets punched and ready just as the bell rings, and spends breaktime nibbling at the leftover pasta from last night that he packed hastily in a tupperware box so he wouldn't have to spend any money on the, quite frankly, ridiculously expensive food they serve in the lunch hall; and then the bell rings once more and his Year 11's pile in through the rusty door. Christopher sees the sheets on his desk and shoots them a death glare; Remus has to fight a grin, but he doesn't do it very well, and a smile makes it up there anyway.

Lily bounds up to him in the corridor at lunch. She very much comes out of nowhere, as she always does.



“Remus!” she calls, and he turns, leaning sideways on his walking stick to grin at her as she hops down the corridor in all of her 5’5 glory, three Biology textbooks careening in her arms, students paving the way for her like the Red Sea.

“Morning, Lils,” he says, turning when she’s by his side. They fall into idle chit-chat and turn down the main hallway towards the canteen, lined with lockers; Izzy and her friends are crowded around her locker, marvelling at something extraordinary in there. He bangs his cane lightly on the bottom row of lockers and she jumps out of her skin, and he can see her phone screen shining for a very brief second before she pockets it.

He decides to give her the benefit of the doubt, this time. Quite honestly, it’s only because he can’t be bothered to go all the way to the office with her phone and have to deal with Mz. Henderson, the ugly bat office lady who spits at you when she talks and always, *always* makes some sort of rude, elitist remark, to remind you that she *is*, in fact: upper class, and you are, in fact: not. So he pretends he saw nothing.

Izzy smiles sheepishly at him and he jerks his head back where he came from.

“Out, come on, girls,” he says. “It’s lunchtime.”

“But it’s *cold*,” one of her friends by the name of Doyeon pouts, at the very moment that a Year 9 girl passes with a big puffer jacket on.

“They make coats for a reason, you know,” Lily says, pointing, “*she* gets it.”

Izzy groans. Remus has figured out that she doesn’t seem to like coats. Lord knows why teenage girls act the way they do.

Regardless, the girls make their way down the corridor - who knows if they actually make it out onto the grounds, that’s the prefect’s problem now - except one small girl by the name of Tara promises to meet them outside and pulls Lily aside to ask a question about her mocks. This takes her

attention for five minutes and leaves Remus standing there idly, leaning against the lockers and waiting for her to finish.

“Sorry,” she breathes, linking her arm in his - it’s somewhat comical, given their near-a-foot height difference. “Tara’s been struggling with Bioenergetics for weeks. She can’t seem to grasp aerobic and anaerobic respiration.”

“Don’t blame her,” Remus scoffs, and Lily laughs as they pass through the door into the canteen. The school isn’t particularly huge and they’re given an hour for lunch so the years are split into ten-ish minute slots. The years allowed to eat first change every day; today is Year 10.

Lily pops away to grab something easy from the hot food area, whilst Remus sits happily at his lunch table and pulls out his pasta, falling into mild conversation with the Travel and Tourism A-Level tutor Charity, who is lovely but someone whom Remus, in his little secluded humanities hovel, does not see much - it’s a marvel that he remembered her name, really, and he is very grateful for when Lily comes back to save him.

They talk avidly about everything and nothing. Remus adores Lily; she and James are probably the closest thing he has to a best friend, and it’s quite hilarious actually that they’re not even originally friends from work, but the first time they met Remus was twenty four and had just moved down to Devon after graduating from University in the North and, on a warm summer day upon sitting on a bench about to dig into a pot of ice cream was approached by a brown skinned angelic eyed little boy of no older than three or four, who had asked for a scoop of his ice cream so politely that Remus, stunned, had simply given him the entire thing. And then Lily had come bustling over, all profuse apologies and laughter and “*You have already had an ice cream today, haven’t you, you devious little monkey?*” and upon finding out they not only lived on the same street but that she worked in the same school he was starting at in September, the rest, seemingly, had been history.

“So James has spent the past three days with his hands all dry and chapped from the papier mache,” she’s saying, now, about Harry and his little primary school activities, “and honestly, you’d think considering we’re two

Science teachers that it wouldn't take the combined efforts of the two of us and an eight year old to figure out how to create a volcano with bicarbonate of soda, but apparently my brain has been fried by eukaryote and prokaryote organisms - James managed it, eventually. He is the bloody Chemistry teacher, after all."

"Is it a science fair type thing?" Remus asks, sipping from his thermos.

"No, just a class project. They've been learning about Vesuvius. The other day Harry laid himself down in the middle of the living room and didn't move for half an hour. He was pretending to be one of the frozen people in Pompeii."

"Oh my *god*," Remus scoffs a laugh, and Lily's face lights up. She shakes her head disbelievingly and takes a sip of her coffee.

"He's *mad*. He's a mad kid." A pause, and then, "He's missing you, too."

"I miss him," Remus says in reply; he hasn't seen Harry in a couple of weeks - everything has just been so hectic working up to Christmas.

"You're still coming Friday, right?"

Remus blinks. The bustle of the canteen seems to disappear and he can see the moment it registers in Lily's mind that he forgot. (It's about the same moment that he remembers.)

"You forgot, didn't you!" she accuses, at the same time he groans and says "I'm *sorry*," head in his hands; Lily cackles.

"It's every year!" she presses, stirring her plate of mac and cheese with a fork. "Aberforth's Christmas pub quiz. Every year, Remus—"

"I know," he whines, digging the balls of his palms into his eyes and then dropping them. She's fuzzy for a moment, but he can still see her smiling.

"And he's upped the prize this year," Lily says. "Apparently, he's chucked in a fifty quid Matalan gift card alongside the bottle of red."

“Matalan? You mean your second home?”

Lily rolls her eyes at his teasing. Even despite her attempt to act unbothered, she still has to defend herself.

“Yes, I mean my second home,” she presses; “because it has everything you need to live! *Matalan*, Remus. I saw the cutest little pet coat that I wanted to buy for Basil.”

Basil being the Potter’s Golden Retriever - who, quite honestly, has enough fur for a coat of his bloody own.

“He has enough fur for a coat of his bloody own, why do you need to buy one?” Remus asks, voicing this thought; it makes her laugh, of course, because he’s right.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” Lily hisses, waving her hand dismissively, “the point is, Aberforth’s Christmas pub quiz is on Friday night and you’re *coming*. For tradition's sake. And also because Molly and Arthur are going to be there, and,” she lowers her voice, as if divulging a big secret, “the streets say that she’s pregnant again.”

“*Again?!*”

“Mhm,” Lily nods. “And you know I can always tell when a woman is pregnant. Mother’s intuition, you know.”

“Your sixth sense,” Remus contributes, and she extends a hand in a sort of “*exactly*” gesture. It is so boisterous that it reminds him terribly of James.

“God, I can’t believe I forgot,” Remus murmurs, placing a hand over his head. “I have about sixty students' worth of mock exam papers to mark before Christmas. I have no time; I was going to do it this weekend.”

“You have Saturday and Sunday,” Lily says. “And, if you really need, I can ask Sev if he can cover a lesson of yours? I know you have your hands full this year.”

And yes, Remus does in fact have his hands full, taking on Year 11, 12, *and* 13 exam stress (usually he manages to skip out on either 11 or 12, but Minerva has gone part time this year) but hell will freeze over before he lets Severus Snape cover one of his fucking lessons, even with his stupid fucking dual English and Philosophy degree. Absolutely–

“–fucking not,” Remus says, rather louder than he probably should’ve; Lily’s eyes widen, but no students hear. Charity might have, but if she did she pretended not to notice.

“Come on, if you’re overworked–”

“I’m not overworked,” Remus states, “It’s the end of term, everything’s hectic.”

“Not for him,” Lily remarks, and Remus scoffs into his pasta.

“Yeah, that’s because about five people do Philosophy max every year,” he mutters, and Lily has to fight a smile. And it’s not like Remus has anything against the Philosophy A-Level that their sixth form offers. He just has everything against Severus Snape. (Also, it’s not like he’s not telling the *truth*; they have him teaching IT, as well, alongside Peter like it’s a fucking pick n mix.)

“Is Pete coming?” Remus asks, reverting back to Friday. Lily nods. “And Mary?”

“I think she’ll be a bit late - she’s got a board meeting. But, yeah.”

“And Sirius?”

Lily pauses, and then her lips quirk into a smile. “What, you mean my husband’s best friend in the whole world? The godson to my child? The guy who has James’ name tattooed on his bicep?”

“He has *James’ name* tattooed on his *bicep*?!”

“Oh, Sirius does crazy things on white wine,” Lily says, dismissively, as if this is something that occurs regularly.

It'll be the third year since Sirius came to the city and he seems to have been linked into the tradition, but he didn't make it last year, so Remus thought it was worth asking.

"Speaking of, he told me you stole a hole puncher from him today?" Lily mentions, and Remus' mouth falls open.

"I did not *steal* it—"

And that's that.

\*\*\*

Friday comes extraordinarily quickly. Remus has to struggle through a staff meeting at 7:30 on Tuesday that he almost falls asleep in, an encounter with Snape in the Arts corridor on Wednesday that had him pissed off for the rest of the day (his smug arse acted like he belonged there more than Remus, as if the art corridor isn't Mary's turf and - seeing as it's closest to the humanities department - as if she hasn't literally *adopted* Remus at this point). On Thursday he gives a whopping *eight* Year 9's detention in one lesson, they were being *that* arsey, and on Friday Sirius tries to talk to him in the staff room, and it goes something like this:

"You going to the Hogs' Head tonight?" he asks, standing vaguely in front of Remus, who is sitting on the sofa on his laptop refining a few things on his powerpoint for next period. It takes him a minute to realise Sirius is talking to him.

"Uh, yeah," he says. Sirius nods.

"Ah," he says, and sits down on the armchair. He has a clipboard. He scribbles something on it, and they fall into silence.

"I couldn't go last year," Sirius says, and Remus is irritated by this point because his text box won't go in the right place and he has his least favourite Year 8's next period and he, quite frankly, hates the poem he has to teach them but it's on the syllabus so he doesn't have an out.

“Right.”

Sirius scribbles some more, and Remus uncrosses and recrosses his legs when the left one goes dead. He switches a tab over to find his Tesco shopping list - he forgot to finish it this morning. There will probably be no slots, now. Sirius is speaking again.

“Heard you guys came second. I think Lily’s riding on winning this year. That Matalan homeware has her in a death grip.”

“Mm,” Remus says, frowning angrily at his tab, which is now frozen. The wifi at this school is atrocious.

He hears Sirius sigh.

“Can I have my hole puncher back?”

Remus’ eyes flicker up to his, all tabs forgotten.

He thinks he might see the ghost of a smile flit over Sirius’ face, but it’s suppressed almost immediately.

“What?”

“My hole puncher,” Sirius presses. “You stole it.”

“I *borrowed* it.”

“Pish, posh,” Sirius says, lounging back and resting his feet on the coffee table. Remus leans over and kicks them off with his own feet. “Oi!”

“People eat on there, Black,” Remus mutters, going back to his laptop. He checks the time; he has twenty-five minutes before lunch ends, and he’s going to make the most of it.

He hears Sirius sigh. He thinks— he *thinks*— he hears disappointment.

Or perhaps he was just breathing.

Regardless, that's the extent of his tirade; he ends up popping round to the mini-kitchen area, where he bumps into Alexandra, his 'sworn enemy' (she's not, really, she's actually a very lovely lady, but she teaches Geography and Sirius teaches History so, you know...). They talk avidly and loudly for the entire twenty five minutes and by the end Remus' powerpoint is barely passable but he knows more about igneous rocks and the history of igneous substances found at Viking excavations than he ever wanted to.

Sirius passes Remus by, out of the staff room, just after the bell has rung, and the only thing he can think as he watches him saunter away towards their joint humanities department is that there is absolutely no way that those trousers are school-appropriate. No way at all.

And yet, he's wearing even tighter ones at the pub, waiting outside with Pete as James, Remus and Lily pull up. Remus didn't think it was possible.

James parks, gets out of the car, and tackles Sirius before he can even breathe a greeting. It is terribly stupid, considering they saw each other at lunch about eight hours ago, but what can you do.

Lily gives Sirius and Peter both brief hugs and the former two amble in, Sirius nattering away at something or other that Remus tunes out to. Lily links her arm in Pete's on one side and Remus' on the other, and they fall into a lovely conversation as they find a table, force James to get up and get pints, and wait for things to start up.

It's fifteen minutes later and they've only just got their answer papers when Mary rushes in.

"Macdonald!" James exclaims, seeing her first, and she grins. Her coily hair is harried and she blows it out of her face as she takes off her scarf, and her coat - Peter reaches out to take them from her, and she thanks him profusely. Lily gets up to give her a hug; it is all very lovely and friendly, in the firelight of the candles in the middle of the table and the happy fragrant buzz of the beer, most glasses half drunk by now, Sirius' empty.

"Sorry," Mary says, again, and Remus laughs.



“You didn’t even miss anything, Mare.”

“Good,” she affirms, plonking herself down on a seat in between Remus and Lily, who sits down after her. She’s opposite Peter, and he passes her the paper before she can even get another word in.

“We can’t think of a team name.”

“That’s a lie,” James interjects. “We haven’t *tried*, yet. Game’s starting in ten minutes.”

“What have you been doing?” she asks, looking between them, and her gaze settles on James and Sirius. Remus doesn’t actually know what they’ve been doing; he’s been talking to Peter about what he’s going to get his Nan for Secret Santa for the past fifteen minutes. He has decided on a pair of festive thermal socks, because her circulation is subpar, but it is probably due to change.

Sirius sticks his arm down the table.

“James was colouring in my tattoos,” he says, and sure enough, his tattoo sleeve - quite a remarkable thing, Remus can admit, all floral patterns and sort of gothic architecture and skeletons and a few spiders curling up his bicep - is an array of colours. James has retrieved felt-tip pens out of nowhere, and - not only that - but had been solely using the red and green ones to colour in Sirius’ arm. He looks like a walking holly garland. Remus fights a laugh.

“You are a child,” Lily says, simply, to James. She confiscates the felt tips and he looks incredibly downtrodden.

“I’d give it a solid C,” Mary chimes in, down the table, after looking at his arm - still outstretched - contemplatively for a solid minute. Lily laughs and rests her head on her shoulder.

“Team names,” Peter prompts, and Lily sits up. She looks incredibly business-like all of a sudden.

It is silent for a moment.

“The A-Team,” she puts forth, and Remus blinks.

“Like the Ed Sheeran song?”

“Ginger knows ginger,” Sirius drawls, and Lily reaches over and smacks him with Mary’s scarf, which has somehow ended up in her possession.

“Men United,” James suggests. He looks at everyone’s bewildered expressions once over before going onto explain; “It’s a pun. Like Man United.”

“We got that, babe,” Lily says, nodding, “but... men?”

Mary quirks an eyebrow.

“In the *general* sense,” James amends, and she still looks consequently baffled, until he continues; “Like how they say mankind.”

“Ah, yes, the inherently sexist idiom, how could I forget?” Mary says.

“Listen,” James presses, keen to save himself now; Remus knows that he doesn’t really want to shoot hard for this name and that, really, he just wanted the name to be a football pun, but if James Potter is doing anything, he is acting fucking stupid for the comedic value, and you’ve gotta respect it. “You’re half of it. Wo-men. That’s feminism, isn’t it?”

Remus bursts out laughing. He triggers the rest of the table and Lily falls about into his chest.

“Moving on,” Sirius says, swiftly, and James takes the moment that Sirius is twirling a pen in his fingers and staring at the sheet of paper to grasp Mary’s hand and assure her that he is *not* a misogynistic twat, just a twat.

(She replies that yes, she knows.)

“Sirius’ Sexy Six,” he puts forth after a moment, and Mary vetoes it immediately.

“Nope.”

“Why not?!”

“You already have an ego the size of Lily’s tits—”

“Hey!”

“—we’re *not* calling it that.”

“Oh my god!” Lily gasps, and when Remus turns to look at her she’s looking across the bustling room. She lowers her voice, and murmurs, “Guys, don’t look now, but Molly Weasley is over there, and she’s pregnant again.”

All five of them look.

“*Useless*,” Lily groans, but she’s right. She is, in fact, pregnant again, if her bump is anything to show for it.

“I’m happy for her,” Remus says, genuinely. Sirius, on the other hand, looks slightly nauseous.

“How many is that?” he asks, absolutely gobsmacked.

“Seven.”

“*Seven?!* ” he gasps, and Lily smacks his hand to tell him to shut up. He repeats the sentiment, as a whisper. “Fuck me, imagine pushing seven children out of your fanny.”

“It’s like getting kicked in the balls seven—” James trails off, holding the syllable as Lily gives him a death glare, “*hundred* times.”

“Better,” she says. “And, no thanks, Sirius. One was enough.”

“Are *all* of her kids ginger?” Sirius asks, turning back to look at her. “Cor, imagine. Seven kids out of your minge and all of them are ginger.”

“Why do I feel like I’m constantly fighting for my life around you?”

“Minge,” says Peter, and the table goes dead silent.

“Thank you for that lovely contribution there, Pete,” James says.

“No,” he presses. “Minge. Ginge Minge.”

It seems to hit everybody at once.

“Oh my fucking god, we are *not* calling our team ‘*Ginge Minge*,’” Lily says firmly, but she’s too late, because Sirius is already writing it at the top of their sheet of paper. And everyone knows once it’s written, it’s an oath.

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Three of six rounds in, they are not in the lead but cutting it pretty damn close.

There had been Christmas Adverts, which they had done pretty decent in due to James and Lily and the fact that Harry is glued to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Christmas movies, which they’d done pretty well in as no one dislikes a good old rewatch of Home Alone in December, and Christmas hits, which had been the easiest but had also knocked them up points-wise due to the fact that Peter not only knew that the all time best-selling female Christmas album was Merry Christmas by Mariah Carey, but somehow knew the exact day, month and year of when it had been released, which they’d pleaded to Aberforth for and had been granted a gracious three extra points after Sirius’ intense flattery. No one seemed to have minded due to the sheer absurdity of Peter knowing that date and yet not remembering what day Christmas had fallen upon last year (a Friday. Sirius had got that one.)

The fourth round had been aptly named “Christmas History trivia”, and so, of course, every eye had fallen upon Sirius.

“Guys, I teach Vikings and Tudors,” he had pleaded, but nothing would be heard in the opposite; they had so much drunken faith, in fact, that they

used their joker on this round, and Sirius looked somewhat nauseous.

Aberforth clears his throat and reads out question one from the piece of paper he's holding, which says "Which scientist, who created the laws of motion, was born on Christmas Day?"

"Darwin," Peter says, immediately.

"No, you idiot, he did evolutionary theory, it's Isaac Newton," Sirius says, scribbling it down (he has somehow become the scribe - his handwriting is nice enough.)

Remus, who got a D in Physics but prides himself on his general knowledge of all of the different old-timey-earth-shattering-discovery scientists, takes another sip of his pint and nods. It's only a little fuzzy around the edges (not so much the likes of Pete - he's not even sure how many he's had, except it's more than a few, which is never good) but, if anything, it just makes him more competitive.

Question two is "What is the literal translation of 'Mistletoe', and where does it originate from?"

Everyone turns to Sirius. He is biting his lip.

"I want to say it's Anglo-Saxon?" he says.

"Well, none of *us* have any clue," James says, and Sirius scribbles it down.

"Literal translation..." he murmurs. "I feel like it'd be something stupid, right?"

And Remus has an epiphany, then. Some sort of old, buried memory resurfaces itself of his incredibly Scottish great-aunt, chasing him around in the snow with mistletoe on a stick. He remembers it, because he can remember her voice, broad Scottish, screeching "*I wouldn't touch ye with a 10ft stick with a pile of shite on the end,*" and, for some reason, his tipsy brain encapsulates this memory and sends it via his nerve system down to his mouth and what comes out is;

“Shit.”

Sirius looks at him.

“What?” he says, under the impression that Remus used it as an expletive.

“No,” he says, “No, shit. It’s shit. Poo.”

“Poo?” James echoes, sounding strangely like an owl.

“Poo,” he affirms.

“Poo,” says Sirius, scribbling it down.

“On a stick,” Remus continues. Sirius looks up at him as if he is a strange, alien-like object that he’s never encountered before.

“On a *stick*?”

“On a stick,” Remus says. Firmly. “It’s a pile of shite on a stick.”

He takes a swig of his pint, and Sirius is fighting a laugh. God knows why.

“I’m trusting you, Lupin,” he says, and writes it down.

Question three is which monarch first delivered the Christmas Day Speech that Lizzie serves every year, and every eye falls on Sirius Black self-proclaimed “monarchy-expert” who groans at the pressure, but knows the answer anyway (George V) and the next is which monarch was crowned king on Christmas Day and after which battle, which even Remus knows to be William the Conqueror after the Battle of Hastings, because every single secondary school to ever exist teaches their little Year 7’s that period of history for whatever goddamn reason. It’s up on Sirius’ *wall*. (Not that he spends any of his time looking.)

The next few questions go by, in which James somehow knows that the first song broadcast from space is Jingle Bells, and Sirius knows that Christmas trees originated from Germany due to a lecture he apparently accidentally

walked into about the Victorian era when at University, which is bloody brilliant, in Remus' book.

His pint is empty and James' is too, so he goes to get two other ones while Aberforth reads out the next question, clear and broad, and it is;

“Who banned Christmas in the seventeenth century?”

And there is not a moment of hesitation that passes through either of Remus and Sirius' bodies as they both, simultaneously, say “Oliver Cromwell.”

The table falls silent, and they lock eyes. Sirius looks somewhat stunned. His eyes are glassy and wide.

Remus clears his throat, and the warmth of the alcohol does backflips in his stomach. “It was, er, Oliver Cromwell. When he was Lord Protector. After they executed—”

“After they executed Charles,” Sirius finishes, except it's more of a starstruck murmur. He's still staring, and Remus feels a flush forming on the back of his neck.

“I did History A-Level,” he says, by way of explaining, and the glass is shattered as James comes back, and Remus takes his pint gratifyingly and takes a long, long sip.

Sirius leans over to write down the answer (and the date it happened, too - probably to try and nab an extra half-point off Aberforth, the sneaky bastard) and there is a smile that seems to be attacking his senseless lips as he does it.

The round ends with “What famously happened on Christmas Day 1914?” which everyone on the table knew was the footy truce between the two sides of WW1, due to that one Sainsbury's advert a few years back.

The rounds continue and the table gets progressively more drunk to the point that Lily is shouting at Arthur Weasley from across the table, being held back by James, and Remus is laughing; laughing and laughing. The

last few questions fly by and are probably somewhat incoherent by the time the papers are swapped to be marked.

They get to round four, as the answers are being read out, and every single person at their table's jaw drops when the answer to question two is read, eloquently, as "poo on a stick."

"Oh my fucking god," Sirius says, marking the other table's answer wrong and trying to peer over to see that theirs was marked right. "Oh my god." He looks at Remus.

Remus opens his mouth, and then closes it. And then they burst into laughter.

"How did you *know* that?!"

"I don't know," he says, wetly, shoulders heaving with chesty laughter. Lily is laughing so hard that she knocks over a glass and Remus doesn't even care that his hands smell disgustingly of beer, because of shit. On a stick.

There is a drum roll as papers are collected up and Remus has never been more shocked in his life to hear "Ginge Minge" come out of Aberforth Dumbledore's mouth.

He's quite sure he'll never hear again for the way that Lily shrieked in his ear.

"It was you!" Sirius is yelling, in his face, when he comes back from talking to Abe with their sheet of paper clutched and crumpled in his taut fist. "Shit on a fucking stick got us enough points to take over the Weaselbee's!"

Remus pauses, swaying slightly, as Sirius shows him the evidence; and yes, he's right. It *was* shit on a stick. And now Lily is doing a victory dance with a £50 Matalan gift card clutched in her hand (which is only slightly redundant, because she cried over the fact that she was depriving a pregnant woman of her Matalan shopping and now she's splitting the voucher with Molly Weasley anyway), and Peter is on Mary's back with the bottle of red



thrust high to the sky, and Sirius Black is looking him in the eyes and telling him that he is brilliant.

“What?” Remus asks, bewildered.

“You’re bloody brilliant,” he says, again, seemingly caught up in the intoxication of movement and feeling and victory, and neither of them seem to realise what he has said for a moment. And what a moment it is. What a lovely moment it is.

His eyes go from earnest to cloudy and Remus doesn’t get the chance to say thank you (would he have said thank you? What are you supposed to reply to that?) before James is dragging Sirius away, and the rest of the night is spent in celebration until their feet give out and they hobble home, and Remus doesn’t really think much about anything but sleep until his head hits the pillow and he does just that.

## ii

Remus gets the mock paper markings done the next day.

It is a lazy day, in that he wakes up with a killer hangover and spends his morning and an hour or two into the afternoon in bed watching some stupid Netflix show on his laptop with a glass of water and a countdown of four hours until he can take another two ibuprofen on the timer of his phone, and then once he feels well enough to get up and actually do human things he makes himself a late lunch, sits, pulls up the mark scheme, and begins to mark.

He starts with his Year 12's, as their paper is a little more lenient with marking considering it's AS and not for a significant qualification, and he is something of a powerhouse. Considering the fact that he exerted himself heavily yesterday he treats himself to a day of shitty comfort food, staying in his pyjamas in the house and hiding himself away like a hermit crab, and it's just lucky that his brain decided on standstill productivity for once it gets to 9pm he's practically done with the papers, and he declares it a job well finished and sits himself in front of the TV to read something.

Except he's thwarted by a lovely little gremlin of a cat.

Poppy, his seven year old grey shorthair rescue, jumps up onto his lap and makes herself a home there almost immediately after sitting down. She had attempted to clamber up his pyjama pants leg underneath the kitchen table when he was sat marking papers, but there was a lack of room for a fat cat such as herself and so it is a reprieve for her when he finally sits somewhere she can accost him in. He feels like she is slightly bitter that he did not put her best interests first. Spoiled little brat.

"You have a bed, you know," he murmurs, scratching behind her ear. "And a sofa. And *my* bed. You can sleep anywhere you want."

She falls asleep on his lap. It is almost instant.

He watches a shitty Hallmark movie that has been done a million times showing on Channel 4, and then hauls Poppy in his arms and goes to bed, with her asleep on the pillow next to him.

He gets a call from Lily the next day.

“Pomona’s in the hospital,” she says, almost immediately; he almost drops the glass of water he was holding.

“Oh my god, is she okay?”

“Yeah,” Lily says. “Kidney infection, they think. They have her on fluids, I’m pretty sure she’s gonna be fine, I’ve just visited her. She’s up and spritely. Eccentric as always.”

“Right,” Remus says, pouring the glass of water into his thirsty house plants. “Christ. Send her well wishes from me.”

“I will,” she replies, and then continues; “It means she can’t do the Christmas party this year.”

“Oh, shit.” Remus didn’t even think of that. Granted, he was more concerned that his friend and co-worker was okay, but nonetheless, the Christmas party is a big deal.

Okay, in reality, it’s not too big a deal. If Remus is being honest, he hates it, because it’s less of a staff Christmas party and more of a staff-in-a-private-school-wearing-their-best-suits-and-putting-on-their-best-pursed-faces-to-show-that-they-belong-at-said-private-school, and Remus, as a working class kid, can barely stand half of them in the environment they’re forced to share, never mind an environment they’re sharing *by choice*.

There are a select few, of course, that aren’t like that - the Potter’s, Pete, Mary. It’s one of the reasons that he doesn’t like Sirius. He can’t exactly pinpoint the first time they spoke or the first feelings that he garnered about the man - it’s not like he’s trailing after every loose memory of him like a lost puppy - but he can remember the way he acted during their first Christmas party. Remus hadn’t realised he was *rich* rich until that day.

Sipping his white wine in his Armani suit and looking down on everyone. It had left a sour taste in his mouth and that taste had not let up, apparently.

And as if she was reading his mind, Lily says the fucker's name.

"Sirius is going to take up hosting, I think."

"*Sirius?*"

Remus' first reaction is disgust, and then it is intrigue. Regardless of his detrimental feelings about rich boy Sirius, he has always wanted to see where he lives. Call it curiosity. Or boredom.

"Yeah," Lily says. "It's probably the best setting. He's got a lovely little open kitchen and seating area plan. And a balcony."

"Of course he has," Remus says, and he can, all of a sudden, hear "MUM!" being yelled terrifically in the background, and Lily sighs.

Remus laughs. "Ah, the wonders of motherhood."

"Piss off, Lupin," she says, with a smile in her tone. "I'll see you tomorrow. Will keep you updated re: Christmas party plans."

"Can't wait," Remus drawls, sarcasm leaking through his tone, and then she's gone.

The week continues. And Remus is bombarded by messages from his mother.

Hope and Lyall Lupin live where Remus grew up, in a quaint little village in Pembrokeshire, South Wales. He holds it very much close to his heart, but especially during Christmastime. He has a childhood full of drives down to Pembroke Castle for the annual Christmas Market; up and along to Saundersfoot to visit the Meadows', Aurora "Rory" Meadows being his mother's best friend before Remus had even been born. He essentially grew up in the same village as Dorcas, who was the same age as him, until they were twelve, when they had to move to the coastal town for her dad's work; but they kept in touch always. Christmas at home has always been his

mother's favourite time of year; snow is often substituted for slush in Wales, but she makes do with her boxes upon boxes of Christmas decorations and lights and that one blow up Santa that the neighbour's dog popped when he was nine.

To cut a long story short, Remus' mother loves Christmas. And Remus' mother loves him. And Remus' mother loves love, so his week consists of;

"Remus, love, are you bringing anyone home for Christmas?"

"No, mam," he says, quietly into the phone, sitting alone in his classroom after school has finished. He has work to do before he can leave to go home, but she called him almost as soon as the clock hit 3:30, so he's stuck here.

"Why not?"

He almost laughs.

"I don't have anyone to bring, mam," he says half-heartedly, twirling a pen between his fingers, and she scoffs into the phone.

"I know you're lying. You're so closed off. Did I raise you to be this way?"

"No, this is just who I am," Remus says, shrugging before realising that she can't see him shrug and pausing before realising he has just, indirectly, confirmed that he's lying. Even though he's not lying. And he can't get a word out before;

"Oh, who is it, then? He or she?"

Remus opens his mouth to put the rumours to rest, and his door opens. Sirius comes striding in.

Remus rolls his eyes.

"Remus?"

“One second, mam,” he says, pulling the one away and covering the speaker. “What?” he says, and Sirius rocks on his heels.

“Hole puncher,” he says, and Remus can hear his mother’s shrill voice coming out of the speaker, and so he puts it to his ear again and gets up, pretty sure he left the hole puncher on a shelf somewhere on the right of his classroom.

“—and I’m sure he *or* she would be delighted to come, we have space for all, you know that, and Winnie’s making the whole cul-de-sac her Christmas cookies again and you know that she always makes way too much, so I’ll need some hungry mouths to feed—”

“Winnie as in Dorcas’ nan?”

“Yes, dear, she moved into the bungalow across and right from us when she got too old, remember?”

“Ah,” Remus says, elongating the vowel and moving across his bookshelf, pushing textbook after textbook out of the way, sure that he left it here—

And Sirius is saying his name again.

“Lupin,” he drones, like a mantra. “Lupin. Remus. Remus. Remus.”

“—so, what’s his name? Or hers?—”

“Remus,” is said once more and he spins around, eyes wide. “What?” he mouths, and Sirius rolls his eyes.

“I’m sort of in a hurry,” he says.

“Help me look, then,” he whispers, listening to his mam drone on - she tends to do this a lot.

“And your dad has been doing the garden all nice, did I tell you he cut the hedge?”

“Yes, you did, mam.”

It's not on the bookshelf. He's in his desk drawers now, *where the fuck—*

“Oh, good, well. And you know he wouldn't mind who you bring, as long as he can talk at them about the big macho stuff—”

“I can't believe you lost my bloody hole puncher.”

He's looking.

“—though he cries at *Downton Abbey*, so you'd have to bring us a crier—”

He's still looking, and Sirius is irritated, and his mother—

“I just want you to find someone, love, it's been such a long time since you went out with— *anyone*, in fact. And I'm sure you won't want to be lonely on Christmas forever—”

—is still speaking, and he's turning, and he can see the hole puncher glinting from underneath an exercise book on a shelf that Sirius is standing right next to. He hasn't seen it.

*Sirius.*

He hasn't seen it.

*Sirius.*

“So if there *is* anyone, anyone at all, you know that we'll welcome them happily—”

“*Sirius,*” Remus says, completely disconnected from the phone pressed up to his ear, up to his neck in water and stress and irritability - he gets the man's attention, and points to the shelf, and there it is. Sirius rummages underneath the exercise book and nods, departing without even a word of thanks.

*Asshole.*

Remus clears his throat and blinks himself back into existence; his mother has been talking, but lord knows what she's said.

"Look, mam, I—"

"Oh, I'm sorry sweetie, I have to go," she says, hastily, sounding like she's a few centimetres away from the phone. "That horrible dog from next door got under the fence again. I'll see you soon, okay?"

Remus nods, slightly numb, and says "Okay," and then the line is dead.

He doesn't think much of it.

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The last week of term goes by slow; there are three events that stick out in his head.

The first consists of a Year 11 student coming to him crying when she gets given her mock exam paper back. Remus gives her his last chocolate bar and a comforting rub on the back, along with the most consoling words he could muster, and he tells her that she can always come to him for extra help or for a comforting ear, which seems to calm her down a bit.

The second consists of his usual cat sitter for the Christmas period (aka a teenage girl who lives down his street) cancelling, because her parents apparently booked her a surprise trip to Spain over Christmas to visit family, which was rather annoying, in all honesty, as Remus couldn't seem to find someone else in time, and he didn't want to have to take Poppy all the way across to Wales.

And he can't even ask James and Lily, because of the third thing, which is:

"We're going to Jaipur!"

This is the first thing that Lily says to him at lunch on Thursday.

"You're what?" he asks. She is beaming.



“To visit James’ grandparents over the vacation period,” she continues. “Monty surprised Effie with tickets for us all; she hasn’t seen her parents in years. Harry’s never even met them. James is over the bloody moon.”

“Oh my god,” Remus exclaims, “Oh, I’m happy for you!”

“Thank you,” she says, grinning. “Oh, and they’re the loveliest little people. I’m so excited for Harry to get to meet them. Effie cried when she got the tickets. She’s obviously wanted to go back forever, but with money conflicts, you know... she thought Monty was cheating, actually,” she laughs, picking at her food, too busy talking animatedly to go through with eating, “because he was constantly saving money and tucking it away somewhere that she couldn’t find. She thought he was buying other women jewellery and such, but it was for this!”

Remus laughs. “That is so lovely; when do you go?”

“Monday,” she says. “Midday, to get there late Tuesday. It’s an almost two week stay.”

She’s beaming, genuine happiness exuding from her soul. Remus grabs one of her hands, lying idly on the table, and grins along with her.

“I’m so happy for you guys,” he affirms, really, and she smiles. He knows she’s really happy for Harry. To get to know his parents; keep in touch with them, his culture, and who he is.

She sighs.

“I’m so happy, I am,” she says, and Remus raises an eyebrow, “but I do feel a little guilty.”

“Why?”

“You know that Sirius spends Christmas with us, usually,” she says, and Remus’ eyebrows raise; he did know that, but he hadn’t expected the loss of it would’ve been something to feel guilty about.

“And?”

“Well, we’re leaving him,” she pouts. “Of course he’s ecstatic for us, but I feel terrible that he’s... going to have a Christmas alone. Essentially.”

Remus raises his eyebrows yet again. Alone? Sirius Black. Alone. It feels wrong to think. He had always assumed Sirius had family, or at least family friends, outside of work and outside of James and Lily and his little godson Harry; did he not?

Lily, all of a sudden, looks strickenly guilty.

“Oh, don’t tell anyone I mentioned that,” she whispers. “He doesn’t... tell people about his family, really.”

“Tell people what?”

“Well I can’t tell you!” she hisses, and then bites her lip and leans over. “The point of the matter is, they’re not really around. So he’ll be spending Christmas alone, and I just feel terrible.”

Not really around. Remus has no idea what that could entail, and, quite honestly, he can love someone to the ends of the earth or hate them to the fiery pits of hell, and either way the one thing he will avoid is overstepping on personal issues. He knows what that’s like.

So, he moves on, but the one thing he does acknowledge in that terse moment where Lily is biting her lip and feeling sorry for leaving a dear friend alone on Christmas, even though it is absolutely justified, is the fact that he doesn’t really know anything about Sirius Black.

Not a smidge.

He knows that he teaches History. He knows that he has nice handwriting. He knows that he called Remus brilliant on Friday night, and that that’s the nicest thing that he has ever said to him and perhaps the nicest thing that anyone could ever say about something as stupid as “shit on a stick”. He, now, knows that he will be alone on Christmas, and that the past couple of years of imagining what Sirius was doing on Christmas - generally

surrounded by dogs and cats and happy families, unwrapping Gucci boxes and Burberry scarves - was a lie, and that he'll be alone on Christmas.

He knows, now, that he knows nothing. And, see, what he doesn't know - and what he thought he knew, what he was positive that he knew - is why, exactly, he dislikes Sirius Black so, with no basis of him to actually dislike in the first place.

Lily is talking again, and so he shoves these existentialisms out of his head.

"It's fine," he says, interrupting her. "He gets it, right? He understands? I don't know how good of a godfather the man is--"

"The best," Lily says.

"Then I'm sure he's nothing but happy. He's a grown, adult man, Lily, he can manage a Christmas alone. You're too empathetic."

"Oh, I know," Lily laughs, and then leans forward, and Remus senses a subject change.

"So," she says, eyebrows wiggling, "What are you wearing to the Christmas party?"

Remus scoffs and pushes her away. She laughs and they talk about anything and everything until the bell for fourth period rings, in which Remus drifts away to his Year 9's and spends the next two hours watching Christmas movies, because it's the end of term.

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Friday is a half-day, which is marvellous for Remus, in all honesty, because he gets to go home at lunchtime on December 17th and curl up in a ball on his sofa with his cat under about five blankets, and that, in all honesty, sounds like heaven.

Of course, he has a form to entertain from 9-12; except Izzy seems to entertain them herself by taking control of his computer and putting various top hits on via youtube that everyone sort of sings along to in their little

groups. Remus gets roped into an intense game of Uno with a few of them, in which he is ganged up on with a plus four pile and loses devastatingly. He gets the feeling it brings about a great catharsis in his students and their smiles make him happy so he accepts it, and then, after their form Secret Santa is full and completed Mrs. Cooper from across the hall brings the leftovers of a cake that she made which makes *everybody's* day, and soon enough it's lunchtime and everybody is wishing him "*Merry Christmas, Mr. Lupin,*" and counting down the seconds to leave like they're in High School Musical; running down the hall to their lockers and screeching at the top of their lungs, and no one reprimands them, because it's Christmas.

He catches Sirius' eye, as he releases his form for break. Sirius doesn't have a form; his Year 13's graduated and they didn't need him for the Year 7's this year; but he stands in his doorframe anyway, leaning against it, watching them all run with a fond smile on his face. He's wearing bobbly antlers and he has his cheeks smeared with red and green paint, and then he opens his door and Remus watches as a group of maybe seven Year 13's leave, all with paint on their own faces, bright-coloured hair and bags of A-Level coursework clutched in their palms, linking arms and wishing him a "*Merry Christmas, Mr. Black,*"; he grins as he waves them off. They must have just found it preferable to be in there - there is a certain group of students in every year group who have claimed Sirius as their favourite teacher, and hang out with him all the time. He's very well-liked, Remus has to admit.

Regardless, his house welcomes him home like a toasty fire in the prickling cold, and he spends the remainder of the day living stress-free and avoiding any sort of responsibilities he has, and Saturday comes all too quickly.

The Christmas Party starts at seven, and Remus is wearing the most subpar shirt, straight-leg trousers and blazer because, to be quite honest, he can't be fucked and he's only going to see his friends and get drunk. Those are his two aims.

(And snoop around Sirius' house, but, y'know, only if the opportunity presents itself.)

Lily picks him up at 6:45 - she's the designated driver for the night - and he finds that Sirius' house is quite far out of the city centre. Not that Remus is smack-bang in the middle, but he's closer; it must be at least a twenty minute drive every morning. He's not sure why he thinks about that, but he makes the most of it until they pull up, and he thinks no more.

The house is gorgeous.

It's all modernism on the exterior; fancy and dark, with a full-blown porch and a pathway lined with what would be roses, were they in the correct season. There is a light-up reindeer in front of a picturesque bay window, and Remus can see tinsel hung around the frame on the inside. There's a wreath on the door. Lily rings the doorbell.

The door opens, and Remus is hit at once with three things; warmth, music, and Sirius.

He looks— He looks. He looks.

“Hi!” he says, and Remus is still slightly gaping, his brain still catching up with his eyes and the fact that Sirius looks not irritating but hot, all lifted features and blue eyes and combed, glossy hair, in a dark navy suit, glass of white in his hand. It was half-drunk already. Remus doesn't blame him - he's about to do the same, but probably not for the same reason.

Sirius focuses on Lily, and his jaw drops.

“You look *amazing*, Lil,” he breathes, and she does; her hair is pulled to the side by an emerald broach-like clip, matching the emerald green of her off-the-shoulder dress, highlighting her lovely green eyes and matching her red hair so well she looks like some sort of princess. Remus can see every single freckle on her shoulders glisten under the sultry lighting as she projects forward and pulls Sirius into a hug, bottle of wine in her hand.

James has the food - he made a Rajasthani dish that Remus hasn't inquired about yet, but anything James makes he has learnt from his mum, and anything his mum makes is, quite honestly, the best thing that Remus has

ever tasted, so he knows it'll be nice. James hugs Sirius too, and then there was one.

Sirius turns to him, and his breath hitches. Whatever the hell he's supposed to make of that, Remus has no clue.

"It's so nice of you to make it," he says, smiling, eyes glistening like the rings on his fingers and the dark set of his eyes that Remus is almost positive is makeup. "Come in, come in."

The house is a gorgeous open seating area/kitchen plan, like Lily said, but it's so much more than that. It's all marble and darkwood and elegance, mahogany; there's a table set with food being dished and deposited, a few platters being passed around with god-knows-what kind of little finger foods on them - and there are servers. Actual *servers* with waiting staff suits and waiting staff smiles as they flourish their metal platters. There are glasses and wines laid out like it's an off-license, and Remus beelines for it.

A lot of it is Sirius' doing, however. There are garlands draped around the balusters of the stairs and garlands lining the windowsills. Tinsel over the crackling fireplace, and he can see co-workers sitting and chatting on the loveseats, some with plates, some with drinks. He can't tell what music is playing - it's not classical, but it's low and calming. There is a small tree in the corner - no taller than 4ft. There are three or four presents scattered at the bottom.

"This place is *insane*," Remus whispers to Lily when she slides in next to him at the drinks bar. She nods.

"Isn't it just," she breathes.

"How does he even afford it here?"

"Inheritance," she shrugs, and, well. That makes sense. "Used to be his uncle's place, I think."

Remus whistles lowly. "Why hasn't he hosted the Christmas parties every year?"

Lily shrugs again, and turns to look at him. "Maybe he hates them just as much as you do."

Remus turns his head to the side, following her gaze, and he spots Sirius.

He's laughing at something Horace is saying, topped-up glass of wine in hand. He flexes his hand and launches into a speech, mouth moving animatedly, his lips cherry-red as if he was drinking Cabernet instead of Chardonnay. His cheeks have a slight flush to them and his hair falls over his shoulder as he gestures with his hand - Remus has no clue what he's saying, but somehow it's enrapturing to watch him. His passion. He seems to bleed it; ooze it, in everything he does.

He's noticed that recently. He's noticed a few things recently - a few things he hadn't cared to spot before.

He supposes that's why Sirius appeals so much to the teenagers at school. He has all the passion that the education system sucks out of them. He has all of the spirit that the mallet of life is trying to hammer out of them. He isn't a square trying to fit himself through a triangle shaped hole like the rest of the idiotic homosapiens walking their dirty little planet; he's four harsh angles and a billion stars. He's a map Remus has looked once over and discarded due to a superficial disagreement with the artistic muse. The latitude and longitude of the mountainous regions oversought. The wind through your hair as you take the last step up Snowdonia. That's what Sirius is. A challenge.

Remus blinks. Lily has turned to nab a few of the finger foods from a tray being passed around to their right, and Alexandra and Charity have joined Sirius' little circle, now. He's spun to accommodate them, so he's facing Remus directly, and as he ducks his head to bring his glass to his lips his eyes move from Horace to Remus, and he freezes.

Sirius locks eyes with him, and there's no change of expression. Just a head tilt as he sips the wine. He looks Remus up and down and pulls the glass away from his lips. Licks them. And then he's turning back, focusing again on Horace, and within a minute he's pitching in with some sort of remark that makes the women laugh heartily and Horace pat him on the back, and

Remus is turning around and pouring himself another glass of Malbec. Desperately.

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The night goes slowly. The wine goes quickly.

The fire crackles from where Remus is sitting, palms on his knees, pretending he's less drunk than he is and pretending he's a part of the circle listening to Severus Snape shit on poor people or whatever the hell he's talking about. Narcissa, the French teacher that Remus has barely ever spoken to, says something that makes his blood boil, and as she clinks glasses with Snape he gets up and just starts walking.

James is in deep conversation with Minerva, one of the tolerable people in his cohort of co-workers - and, luckily, deputy-head. It would be a wonder for things to get done if she wasn't around, and he knows James is a favourite of hers and vice versa, so he leaves them be and looks around, trying to find Lily, or Mary, or Pete.

He can't seem to find any of them. Granted, he's not looking very hard, but he can't find them, and he can't find Sirius either.

Come to think of it, it's almost midnight and he hasn't seen Sirius for at least an hour.

He panders over to the food table, nibbling on a few doughballs that someone brought, and Dola Adisa, his fellow English teacher, engages him in light, polite conversation as she comes over to nab a slice of a lovelily designed yule log, a leaf of prickly holly stuck into the middle for decor.

She gets pulled away by someone or something and he's alone again. And there is wine. So he shuffles over and pours himself the last of the Pinot Grigio that Lily brought, and ambles around a group of people in white dresses and taut buns, hair-pinned so tight to their scalp it is going to burst. He wanders.



He ambles down the corridor, towards the front door, where he entered. He traces a finger over the top of a mahogany Victorian sideboard as he passes, and finds himself at the bottom of a royal staircase, flourishes with garland, and the music must be coming from somewhere in this room in particular because it's in Remus' ears like a siren, and yet it's not as loud as it could potentially be due to the ringing - he starts to climb the stairs. His legs move for him.

He's unsure why. He just really hates these parties, and half of these people and their elitist schemes, and for some reason, for some reason, for some reason he wants to know more about Sirius Black and his strange name and his strange little life.

He knows he shouldn't be up here by the time he reaches the top of the stairs, yet he doesn't retreat. It's a pretty landing. There's a wide window that overlooks a large back garden and the beginnings of a sparse forest, outdoor lights dividing the land that is Sirius' and the land that is not. There are a few doors, and, because his drunk brain does not think better, he opens one of them.

It is a bedroom. He can tell, immediately, that it's a bedroom, and what a bedroom it is. It's the only place in this house so far that has felt like home; all ruffled sheets, shoes strewn across the floor. There is a vanity box open on the desk, and a mirror with various post-it notes in cursive handwriting that Remus' eyes are too blurry to read. The curtains are silk and so are the bedsheets; he pinches the fabric between his thumb and forefinger. And then he sees that there are pictures on the desk.

And there's Harry, James and Sirius. In a photo frame. They seem to be on a beach, somewhere; Sirius is taking the picture. It's a selfie. Harry is sitting between them both, and he can't be older than five. James has an arm around his son, and Sirius' free arm is ruffling his hair up; he seems to have caught Harry mid laugh. James is poking his tongue out, leaning over into the frame, and Sirius' nose is scrunched as he teases Harry. It's happiness in a frame.

There's more, but he doesn't get to see them. He doesn't get to see them, because one of the waving silk curtains is pushed aside with a hiss as the

metal grommets slide across the metal rod, and Sirius is poking his head out, frowning.

His face eases up when he sees Remus, but barely. He gapes.

“Having fun, there?” he says, and his voice is completely indecipherable.

“I’m sorry,” pours from Remus’ mouth. He opens his mouth to say something and then closes it. “I don’t suppose it would make sense for me to say I was looking for the bathroom—”

“I wouldn’t believe you.”

Remus blinks. “Why?”

Sirius shrugs. “Because you’re always...” he makes a vague circular gesture with his free hand, and Remus registers that he is drunk too, “here.”

*“Here?”*

“There.”

“What does that mean?”

Sirius licks his lips and takes a deep breath, and then releases it and closes his eyes.

“It’s fine,” he says, on a completely different path. “As long as you don’t touch or break anything. Shut the door when you’re done. And the bathroom is across the hall, in case you really did mean it.”

He pulls back, through the shimmering veil, and Remus stands there dumbly for a moment as the draught catches his ankles and makes him bodily shudder.

And then he is moving, and he’s stepping through the drapes, too, out onto a balcony. Sirius is leaning forward onto the stone wall, twirling a glass of red wine against the concrete.

He turns and sighs.

“Can’t take a bloody hint, can you?” is what Remus thinks he hears him mutter, but he isn’t sure, and regardless, it would be true. Might as well follow through with it.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” he says.

“Mmm,” Sirius says. He twirls his glass once more, and they both stare out into the night sky. Remus can hear the bustling of the party ever so vaguely, but the stars are more interesting to him, here.

Sirius takes a sip of his wine, and grimaces.

“I don’t like red wine,” he says, confused, staring at it as if he has no idea how he even acquired this strange substance. He smacks his lips and shudders. Remus turns.

“I don’t like white,” he says, matter-of-factly, holding up his own glass.

There is a moment when Sirius is simply looking at him, heavy-lidded, and then some sort of impasse lifts from over them and they swap glasses. As fluid as the wave returning to the sea.

Sirius sips from Remus’ glass, and takes a deep, deep breath.

“I hate these parties, you know,” he throws into the abyss, and Remus quirks an eyebrow. He leans with his hand against the stone wall of the balcony and looks over at him.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Sirius shrugs. “It’s just never fun for me. It feels like a performance.”

“A performance?”

“Yeah,” he says, taking another sip. “Like— like I’m *auditioning* to keep my fucking job every year or something.”

And Remus feels that. He does.

“Well, at least you have it somewhat easy.”

Sirius turns to him. “What?”

Remus gestures to him; the entire being of him, body and soul, and then he turns. Gestures to the house. To the atoms all around them. The dust in the air.

“You’re living a private school kid’s wet dream,” he says, laughing breathily to himself, but Sirius does not laugh. He simply sighs, takes another long sip of his drink, and looks out, eyes glazed, into the distance.

“I suppose,” he murmurs. “But at what cost?”

Remus isn’t really sure what to say to that. So he doesn’t.

“This place isn’t mine,” he says, filling the silence. “It’s my uncle’s. He died a few years ago. Left me everything he had.”

And Remus can’t tell if he’s complaining or if he’s simply stating a fact. He doesn’t think he could deal with any more whiny rich people today.

“And I’m not complaining,” he says, and, well, there’s that, at least. “But... I feel *wrong*. Living here, when this,” his being, the atoms, the dust, it lingers, “is exactly what I was cast out of. It’s not what I ever wanted and I feel like every day I’m just letting this whole new person eat me up. Becoming everything that I hate. Becoming my—” he takes another long sip. Finishes the glass. “Becoming my fucking mother.”

There is a moment, in which the air around them is ice, and neither of them can bear to break it. And then Sirius inhales incredibly sharply, coughs once, and rubs both of his hands over his face, groaning.

“Christ, I’m sorry,” he murmurs. “I’m very drunk. You barely even know me. Ignore... just ignore all of that—”

“It’s okay,” Remus says, shrugging. “Thankfully, I’m drunk too, so I don’t actually mind.”

He’s surprised at how true the words are.

Sirius smiles, gently, at him, and then turns back to the view. Taps his fingers against the stone.

“I hate these parties too, you know,” Remus says, and Sirius scoffs bodily.

“Yeah, I could’ve guessed that.”

“What?” Remus says, turning to him. “Why?”

“You hate everything,” Sirius says, putting emphasis on the last word and rocking forward on his heels a little bit, theatrically; Remus gasps, but feels a smile playing on his face.

“No I don’t!”

“Yes, you do,” Sirius says, and he’s giggling now. “You’re a Scrooge.”

“I’m not a Scrooge.”

“You’re a Scrooooooge,” Sirius teases, and Remus breaks, and laughs.

“I’m *not*,” he says, still laughing. “Scrooge hated Christmas. I love Christmas, I just hate—”

“People?” Sirius suggests. Remus shrugs.

“Something like that.”

They’re silent for a moment.

“You don’t like me,” Sirius says. Remus scoffs.

“That’s different,” he presses. “You don’t like me either.”

“Mmm,” is the taciturn reply that comes. Sirius takes a deep breath and tucks his hair behind his ears. It’s a strangely delicate motion.

“I don’t think you really know anything about me, though,” Sirius says, quietly, and Remus bites his lips. Finishes off his own glass. Sirius’ glass.

“Maybe not,” he breathes, in admittance. They pause for a moment. He can feel Sirius’ eyes on him.

He turns.

“But I know, now, that you hate these Christmas parties,” he offers. “So that’s something I know.”

“And I know you hate them too.”

“And I know you hate your mother.”

“And I know you hate *people*.”

“You wanna know who I fucking hate?” Remus says, turning bodily now, and Sirius grins, “I fucking hate—”

“*Snape*,” they say at the same time.

Remus locks eyes with him and then they fall apart into laughter.

“God, I could *throttle* that guy,” Sirius seethes, gripping onto the stone wall. “But Lily still holds some kind of sentiment for him, so I don’t.”

“Right?” Remus emphasises. “Same!”

“You wanna know who else I hate?”

“Who?”

“Narcissa Malfoy,” Sirius says, with a bodily shudder, and Remus smiles and nods.

“Mhm. A snob in human form.”

“You know she’s my cousin?”

If Remus had anything to spit out, he would have, just then.

“*What?*”

Sirius laughs, and it’s so pretty. “She’s my full blood cousin. Mother’s brother’s daughter. She doesn’t tend to advertise it and neither do I. Probably for completely opposite reasons, mind you, but...”

“That,” Remus says, gripping onto the wall, “is ridiculous.”

“Don’t even remind me,” Sirius says. “I know.”

And the conversation falls silent but not flat, and Remus can hear an owl hooting. He picks up his empty wine glass and swirls it around for a second, and then he has an idea.

“I’m sick of pretending that I like these people,” he mutters into the ether. “Sick of pretending that I tolerate what they stand for.”

Sirius hums in response. Remus’ mind is whirring. He is drunk and he is fury.

“I’m gonna go show them what I fucking stand for,” he says, picking up his glass and turning to leave; Sirius panders after him.

“Where are you going?”

Remus turns. Sirius looks delightful; wine-flush and December drizzle painting his pale, pretty face the deepest carmine red. His spindly hands are twiddling at his front, as if he doesn’t know quite what to do with them. He sniffs, and exhales corporeal ice that sends a shiver running down Remus’ spine. He’s not sure if it’s from the cold or the alcohol or... something else.

“Follow my lead,” he simply says, in return, and Sirius’ expression shifts subtly. His lips quirk, and his eyes glint with something— something authentic. Mischief. It’s a new look on him; it’s a refreshing one.

Remus pads downstairs, on his tip-toes, and Sirius comes down after him.

Lily catches his eye almost immediately as he re-enters, and she raises an accusatory eyebrow. And he knows how it looks; he’s almost positive his own face or at least his nose is red from the cold, and Sirius looks slightly harried from where the wind tackling the balcony whipped through his hair, but she’s busy talking to Mary, so she doesn’t come to investigate. He beelines for the wine and picks up the first bottle of red that he can find.

He pours it in his glass. Turns to Sirius.

“I don’t like red wine,” he says, and Remus smirks.

“It’s not for you to drink,” he whispers, pouring it in with a shaky hand, and Sirius looks enraptured. He looks enthralled.

Remus dances over to the main group, chatting and lounging on the loveseats by the crackling fire, and Sirius trails after him like a dog. He perches on an armchair arm that Mz. Henderson is sitting on; she looks incredibly displeased.

Sirius gets pulled into conversation by Horace, who is touch and go, temperamentally Tory but wouldn’t say it to your face, cares more about his doctorate (you *must* remember that he’s Dr. Slughorn, not Mr. Slughorn) and his old coin collection. Sirius looks at Remus panickedly and he nods. It’s okay. Sirius entertains. He’s rather good at acting sober, Remus thinks, but perhaps he isn’t the best judge of that right now.

And Snape is standing up. From where Remus is, Snape sits directly opposite, lounging on a sofa in idle conversation with one of the Carrows (Maths teachers) and Narcissa, who is sat at about a 45 degree angle to Remus’ left, at the edge of a sofa that Snape will have to squeeze past to get out of the circle.



Snape brushes himself off. He skirts around the coffee table, and Remus is saying something to a woman standing next to him, who, thankfully, engages him in conversation and pushes forth his narrative.

Remus gets up, under the guise of a large gesture about whatever bullshit is coming out of his mouth, and he turns to his left and collides, full-frontal, with Severus Snape's chest.

Red wine goes pouring down his crisp white shirt like a waterfall.

There is a moment of triumph and then gasps, one from Snape, in disgust, one from Sirius in awe; Mz. Henderson is getting up, immediately, and gripping onto Snape's shoulder as if he has just been stabbed, and Remus is apologising profusely in one breath and in another spinning and throwing his arms at large by his side, splattering the remains of his wine violently across Narcissa Malfoy's pale blue evening gown.

She shrieks, and, if Remus thought it couldn't get worse, a server comes across with a tray of white wine to witness the carnage and Sirius, standing behind the sofa, skirts out of Horace's hold and pushes him with all of his might, sending the poor man toppling straight over the arm that Narcissa is gripping desperately, squealing at her precious night dress.

He falls face first into her lap. The tray falls onto the floor by their feet, and Remus cringes at the impact as glass shatters monumentally, and white wine goes everywhere.

*Everywhere.*

Narcissa is screaming and so are the two women sitting next to her; one that Remus believes is called Isabel, her hair silky and black and her father's fortune in her pocket; her dress is also ruined. Remus turns to Sirius amongst the people pushing past him to help the poor server up and fondle over Narcissa, who is close to tears, cursing him with every swear under the sun and then some, and he's standing beside Horace, stunned. His mouth is wide open as if he cannot believe his eyes; as if everything is a foggy LSD dream and the chaos will clean itself up.

Remus feels himself being pulled backwards by the shirt - he bumps into the server, who is upright and apologising profusely, attempting to find the culprit of his pushing - but he doesn't get very far before Severus Snape is striding over the glass, and punching him square across the face.

He sees stars.

"Severus!" Lily cries, as Remus staggers back; she tries to catch him but fails, gripping haphazardly onto the fabric of his blazer to make sure he doesn't topple over, but he's not listening. Snape continues to gain on him, Lily forgotten, and Narcissa seems to have redirected her attention on him, and she's screaming something like "*Putrid, scum of the earth,*" and Snape goes to punch Remus again but he doesn't make it because there is Sirius, pulling him and his looming fist backwards.

Snape turns and Sirius kicks him in the crotch. He collapses to his knees and Sirius knees him in the face.

"Sirius, stop it!" Lily is shrieking, holding onto Remus - who, by this point, is straightened up and can hear ringing alongside the throbbing pain in his jaw - as Sirius, essentially, begins to beat the shit out of him, and everybody's yelling. Minerva is trying to regulate the fight but no one can get close to him, and Snape gets a few hits in but Sirius obviously has the upper hand; Narcissa, Isabel, Henderson, they're all yelling expletives, bounding off the walls of the room like an echo, a crash. And the only reprieve comes in the form of James Potter, who grips onto Sirius' arm and pulls him back, tussles with him angrily for a moment until Sirius calms and James is looking him in the eyes, firmly, fists clenched like he wants to join in but eyes clinging to whatever shred of maturity and non-spontaneity that has dissipated from Sirius.

"*Stop,*" he commands, and Sirius stops.

He's breathing heavily. His pupils are dilated, and Snape has a split lip; Narcissa is rushing over to make sure that he is okay in her wine-stained gown, her red lipstick smeared and her wide, pursed face clad with mascara trails from her sore weeping, and Lily is pulling Remus away.

“No,” he moans, wanting to get– he doesn’t know. To Sirius. Maybe. James. Somewhere. To a medicine cabinet, and to a bus stop, and to an avalanche trail. Anywhere and nowhere.

“Come *on*,” she says through her teeth, pulling up her dress with one hand like Cinderella rushing away with one shoe, gripping his arm with another and pulling him like he’s a child.

Peter meets them at some point and Mary, one step ahead as always, has pulled their coats from the hook, and Lily drags him out into the biting cold just slow enough for him to hear James booming command that everyone get out, *now*, and Narcissa begin to scream bloody fucking murder, expletive after expletive until Lily shuts the front door and all he hears is the rushing of his own ears.

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“What the *fuck* was *that?!* ” Lily screeches, as soon as the four of them are in the car, and she grips the wheel with so much force that he’s sure the engine will begin to smoke any minute now. She twists the ignition and it starts, and Remus doesn’t know what to say.

“I don’t know,” he says, and it’s not the truth, but it sort of is.

“I didn’t even see what happened,” Pete pipes up from the back, “why did he punch you?”

“He poured wine down Severus’ front,” Lily says, jolting the car into motion. Her windshield was obviously frozen over this morning and she has scraped it clean enough to see, creating a sort of border around the walls. Remus trails it with his eyes.

“On purpose?”

“Yes,” Lily says.

“No,” Remus says, and then, “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I hate him,” he says, resolutely, and Mary laughs in something of disbelief.

“Fucking hell,” she mumbles, head in her hands. “We’re never hearing the end of this.”

“Are you bruising, Remus?” Peter asks, innocently.

“I bloody hope you are,” Lily mutters, and Remus pulls down the sun visor with marginal difficulty and examines his still throbbing jaw.

“Nope.”

“Nice.”

“Not nice!” Lily says, eyes wide, She turns a corner and all Remus can see are trees. “We have to *work* with him. All of them! Narcissa, too! They’re never going to let this one go—”

“Who broke the glass?” Mary asks, as a genuine inquiry, and Peter turns to her.

“That server.”

“But— how did he fall?”

“Oh,” Pete says, and Remus almost crosses his fingers in the hopes that he didn’t, but he’s too late, because, “Sirius.”

Lily seems to go rigid.

“Sirius?”

“Mhm.”

“He pushed him?”

“Mhm.”

“You saw it?”

“Yeah.”

She turns to Remus.

“You planned this,” she says, and Remus has somehow just remembered of Sirius’ existence and thinks that he’d quite like to speak to him right now and exchange more things that they hate underneath the moonlight of transparency and the glimmer of white wine upon laminate floors, soaking into the bottom of Lily’s heels.

“Go back,” he says, and Lily gapes.

“Are you *out of your mind?*”

“Sirius—”

“No,” Lily says, absolute disbelief and abject shock in her voice, “I’m taking all three of you home, and there’ll be no word against it. Jesus Christ, Remus.”

He hears those words again, an hour later, when Lily pulls their now-empty car up to Sirius’ house for the second time that night.

“Jesus Christ, Remus,” James says as he answers the door, and then he pulls him into a hug.

“Is everyone gone?”

“Yeah,” he says, nodding. He shows them in. There’s no trace of any life except for the oozing of wine on the floor and the pathetic dustpan of shards of glass that James has tried to pick up.

“Be careful, over there, there’s still small pieces we’re gonna have to Hoover,” he points out, and then he goes on to explain how the night unfolded after they left; in expletives, marginally bigoted comments and legal threats, Narcissa Malfoy’s demand that James pay £350 for her dry cleaning, and Minerva McGonagall’s threat for all of them to be made

redundant, and Sirius, somewhat catatonic with a bloody mouth and a ghostly face.

He finds Sirius upstairs when he manages to slip away from James and Lily. He's in the bathroom. Across the hall.

"Fuck," he mutters, jumping as Remus enters. "It's you."

"It's me."

"You left."

"I came back."

Sirius exhales out of his nose and turns back to the mirror he was looking into. There are bloody cotton balls on the countertop. Remus clicks the door shut behind him, but he daren't go further.

"I bit my tongue," Sirius says, quietly. "Badly. It only just now stopped bleeding, I think, but then I— I moved my face too abruptly and now this thing—" he softly pads a cotton ball to his bottom lip and it comes back bloody, "is bleeding again."

Remus sighs. He's marginally more sober. Sirius doesn't seem to be. He's swaying, bracing himself on the sink.

"Let me see."

"No," he says, picking up the bottle of antiseptic he's using and spilling a bit.

"Let me have a look, Sirius," he says, putting a hand on his shoulder, and Sirius goes rigid. He stops breathing, and Remus fears that he's done something for a second until Sirius turns, and they're close. They're close.

He has tears in his eyes, Remus thinks. He has blood on his lips. He has lightning in his palms.

Remus slowly takes the antiseptic bottle from him and pulls out a cotton ball from the plastic bag. He douses it and reaches out, hesitantly, to nudge Sirius' head upwards from the underside of his chin. He complies.

"It's not bad," Remus murmurs, dabbing at his lip with the cotton ball. Sirius parts his lips for his leisure, and Remus moves his hand upwards to press a guiding thumb and forefinger to his cheek and under his jawline, and Sirius is looking at him. Remus can't seem to meet his eyes.

He dabs it again.

"You got him better than he got you," he continues, and Sirius swallows. Nods, slightly; just gentle enough that it doesn't affect Remus tending to his lip.

He pulls it off and throws the cotton ball into the bin. A new one is pulled out of the bag, doused with antiseptic, and he dabs again; when he pulls back there is no fresh blood, just the dried remnants.

"Okay, it stopped," Remus whispers. He presses it to Sirius' lip once more, cupping his cheek, now, and Sirius' eyes drop down to his arm and back up as he pulls the cotton ball away, and the world seems to stop.

They're extraordinarily close, and Remus is feeling something he doesn't think he has ever felt before.

He throws the ball into the bin without even moving his eyes away from Sirius'. They're pretty. Pretty and blue and unrestrained. Pretty and blue and unrestrained and special, warm, coarse under his fingertips, soft under his palm, so much more beyond the flush of his cheeks and the blood on his lip and the line of his jaw; so much more.

"Does it still hurt?" seems to come out of Remus' mouth before he gives it permission to; his hand is warm.

"No," Sirius says, shaking his head. It jerks Remus' palm out of place and then somehow when he stops it fits even better than before, like a missing puzzle piece.

Remus looks at his lip. Looks at his lips. His eyes linger there for at least five seconds before Sirius is smiling, bitterly. Scoffing, slightly.

“I can’t believe—” he mutters, exhaling out of his mouth, and it’s slurred. “I did that to get your *attention*. Can you believe that?”

Remus gapes. “What?”

“You only...” Sirius trails off, pursing his lips, frowning and shaking his head viciously. When he looks back up at Remus there’s an accusation in his eyes. “And- and here you are. I have it. And I don’t fucking want it, because it’s all—” shaking his head, shaking his head, “it’s all for the wrong reasons.”

Remus is absolutely bewildered. He can’t tell if the alcohol is still fogging up his brain or if it’s fogging up Sirius’.

And then he opens his mouth, and it takes a long, sad moment for the sound to come out, and when it does it sounds somewhat broken.

“I *punched* him,” he breathes. “And I *liked* it.”

“He deserved it.”

“It’s not *about*—” His voice breaks and Sirius shakes his head, stepping back. Away from his grasp. Remus’ hand falls awkwardly by his side. It feels like it doesn’t belong there anymore. “It’s not *about that*. It’s about *you*.”

“Me?”

“You,” Sirius whispers. He swallows viscerally. “You only pay attention to the things you don’t like about me. You never pay attention to the things you *do*.”

Remus is stunned. He opens his mouth to speak but nothing comes out but a feeble “I—”, and he can’t help but feel that Sirius deserves more than that.



“But you *hate people*, right?” Sirius asks, still slurring, and there is bitter sarcasm woven into his tone. It feels like a stab to the gut. “You hate— we both *hate*— that’s all, all there is, isn’t it?”

They stand, a metre apart, and Remus could grasp for him. He doesn’t realise that he wants to until he feels his fingers physically twitch, and Sirius’ face is contorting, and he’s gripping the rim of the sink like it’s the only thing holding him up and Remus thinks it actually is.

“It’s bullshit,” he says, and a tear falls onto his flushed cheek. “Living a life... a life fuelled by hatred. It’s *bullshit*.”

And with that he lets go of the rim and, in an attempt to leave, falls forward, slightly; Remus catches him by the sides of the shoulders and he shrugs out of his grasp immediately, wrenching the door open and stumbling across the hallway to his room. Remus can hear his sharp breaths all the way until the door slams, and he has no idea what just happened. He has no clue.

### iii

Remus doesn't see Sirius for the rest of the weekend.

It's not an unusual thing. He hasn't seen Sirius on the weekends... forever. Since he's known the man. He has never, ever seen Sirius on the weekend.

Problem is, he can't stop thinking about him.

He doesn't exactly know what to do with that.

Lily drives him home, later that night, whilst James opts to stay for the night with Sirius and get her to pick him up tomorrow morning when she goes to pick Harry up from Effie and Monty's, and they don't speak much in the car. She seems to sense his indifference and the high running low and burning out like a piece of wool and so she simply kisses his cheek goodnight and waits until he makes it in the door before driving off, and he's in his bed, passed out before she's even down the end of the street.

He wakes up with a hangover to end all hangovers.

And so he's given a lot of time to think. At least once the painkillers kick in and his head doesn't throb as badly. He's given time to think and, as it turns out, all of those thoughts seem to be centered around Sirius, which is an entirely mind-boggling prospect and something that has never, ever happened before and so he's not exactly sure how to handle it. How to cradle it.

See, this is his train of thought for the day; he can't stop thinking about Sirius. His authentic smile under the moonlight and the way his lips curled around his wine glass. The low sultriness of his eyes and the way his cheeks bloomed like the rejuvenation of spring in deadly December, and the way his cheek felt under Remus' hand - yes, it's all of those things, pretty, pretty, pretty, Remus isn't unobservant, but it's also the more fundamental aspects of him. Who he *is*. What he stands for. All of the general trivia - a round on Sirius History, read by Aberforth as their joker at the pub quiz and Remus

isn't getting any points because Remus seems to know more about the history he teaches than the history he holds, on a deeper level, and he can't help feeling that it's sort of weird that the most he knows about Sirius is his last name, the fact that he's irritating and the fact that he was *right*, he really has only paid attention to the bad things. Like the way his voice grates on Remus' bones in the staff room, just a tone higher than everyone else's, an itch he can never seem to scratch. The fact he's insubordinately possessive about his things and the fucking smug smile that he shoots Remus when he's right, about anything. The way that he gets one up over him, all the time, and the fact that he's the most well-liked teacher and the fact that he always takes all of the Malteasers out of the Celebrations box that is quite often found in the staff room without *any* concern for *anybody* else, and more, and more, and more.

It's all bad. None of it is good.

And Remus can't help but think - he can't help but ponder. Can't help but berate himself, surrounding himself with critical analysis and not ever going that little bit deeper. He feels incredibly hypocritical to call himself an optimist when all he's ever been toward Sirius - towards everyone - is a pessimist. And he's learned an incredible amount in the past few days about Sirius Black; like the way that he chews on the end of his pen when nervous (depicted quite marvellously during the Christmas quiz) and the fact that he gestures with his hands; for some reason it gets you even more enraptured in a story than it would be if he were just speaking. The way that he is a good godfather and the fact that he is lonely. The way he taps his fingers against surfaces absently. The way that he always lets you finish speaking before he chimes in, even if you can tell he's due to burst.

How close-minded. How utterly ridiculous.

And he supposes that this amalgamation of such a long dislike combined with such a juxtapositional turn of what can be nothing but irritable, simple *intrigue* towards the other man is what leads him to spend the entire day, the entire night, thinking about him and how much that Remus doesn't know. It almost becomes an obsession.

He conceptualises it like the typical iceberg cliché. Puts “hole punch fiend” on the small berg above the water and “*EVERYTHING ELSE*” submerged. He thinks– he thinks– he *feels*–

He feels sympathy.

He feels like he wants an excuse to talk to him, and he gets it rather quickly, when his mum texts him, “*Does Sirius eat meat? Xx*”

He’s quite confused. To say the least.

He texts back that he is “*Quite sure he does, yes, but also why on earth are you asking that?*” and he almost includes “*And how do you even know Sirius?*” but his mother fawns over James Potter like a mother duck to her ducklings, so that’ll be why; regardless, she calls him, and Remus soon learns that he has made a truly grave mistake.

She berates him almost immediately.

“What do you *mean* why on earth am I asking?” she says, and Remus can tell she’s in the midst of cooking or cleaning or doing something, bustling around the house, because her voice is echoey and he’s on speaker. “I’m working on Christmas. Do make it one-hundred percent sure for me, love, ‘cause it would be terrible if I made a turkey on the twenty-fifth and he couldn’t even eat any of it. Dorcas is vegetarian, of course, but I think she’s bringing her own nut roast to pop into the oven–”

“Hang on, mam,” Remus says. “What are you on about?”

“Christmas!” she emphasises. “Honestly, darling, it’s the first time that you’re bringing someone home, and I didn’t get to come down and see you in summer like we usually do because of the whole palaver with your Dad’s truck tyres and the neighbours bloody porcupine - she’s got rid of that thing, finally, so don’t start worrying–”

And, oh. Oh, Remus has made a big mistake. A huge, grave mistake.

“Mam, that’s not–”

“Not like I worry about you,” she continues. “No, let me say it. I do, my baby. You’re so admirable, you really are, but sometimes I feel like you put too much of yourself into your work. I worry you’re going to stress yourself to death. You’re a stresshead.”

Remus’ throat dies, and the only thing he can seem to say is, “I am *not* a stresshead.”

“You *are*,” Hope laughs, and he smiles, instinctively, almost forgetting about the clarification he has to make in the midst of her happiness, because he knows she worries, and she’s saying it, now, “And sometimes Lily tells me things that I don’t like to hear. Like how you did yourself in walking up and down those stairs because those bloody teachers are arseholes and put all of your 1-to-1’s on different floors—”

“Mam, it’s fine,” he groans, but she’s right, that had been rather irritating and it had triggered a flare up that had had him wearing his ring splints on his bad fingers for so long that he had actually developed a slight sun tan over them in the warmth of July. “I’m taking care of myself. I’m a grown, adult man.”

“You’ll always be my baby.”

“*Mam.*”

“And lacking sleep doesn’t help, either, and I *know* you’re not sleeping enough when it says you’re active on Facebook Messenger at 1 o’clock in the morning on school nights, like some sort of vagabond.”

“Did you just call me a *vagabond*?” he laughs, out of sheer disbelief, and she hums in the affirmative. “Mam, where is all of this coming from? I’m taking care of myself perfectly well.”

She hums, to contemplate. “Nowhere, besides the fact that you haven’t been checking in as much. But I always worry about you, Re. You’re my only baby. It’s my one job.”

“Your one job is walking Carol’s poodles on Mondays through Thursdays.”

“My *first* job. My *most important* job.”

“You’ll see me tomorrow,” he tells her, and he had definitely meant to say something to her, but it had slipped his mind until she says;

“Yes, and I’ll be checking up on you and making sure you’re not lying to me. Sirius will tell me the truth.”

There’s a silence.

“Mam, Sirius is—”

“I’m glad you have someone, Remus,” his mother says, and it is so earnest and so heartfelt and he loves her so much that he can’t bring himself to rebuke it. He can’t bring himself to dampen her hopes, because then she’ll start thinking that he really is halfway to killing himself, and he just— she’s had enough stress in her life. She has.

The phone call ends with Remus meekly making some excuse to go, promising her that he’ll see her tomorrow and that he’ll find out if Sirius is a vegetarian or not, and then he’s gone, and it takes a solid three hours to sort through all of the thoughts whirring through his head and form a game plan.

He writes out a text to his mother. It explains the misunderstanding. He’s going to send it.

He doesn’t send it.

An hour later he’s knocking at Sirius’ door.

Sirius answers, and he looks okay, but tired. He’s in a hoodie and loose trousers, and the skin of his lip has knitted back together and it’s only a little swollen. Really it has left a rather dark bruise that seems to be at the pinnacle of its appearance. It’s not as bad as it looked.

He blinks at Remus standing in his doorway, scratches his head once, and drops it dumbly at his side. He hasn’t shaved since Saturday. It’s noticeable. The meagre scruff suits him, actually.

“Hi,” Remus says. He’s not too sure where he’s going. For the first time in his life, he has no idea where he’s going - or, more aptly, how he’s going to get to his end goal. He’s winging it. He’s winging... Sirius.

He looks confused.

“Hi?” he says. “How are you?”

It’s painfully awkward small talk. Remus goes along with it.

“I’m okay. How's the lip?”

“Good. Healing.”

“Right.”

“Right.”

“Heard anything from Snape? Or Narcissa?”

“No.”

“Right.”

“Right.”

Silence.

“Remus,” Sirius says. “Are you just here to chat, or...?”

“Are you a vegetarian?” he blurts, and Sirius’ face flickers with abject confusion and something that seems somewhat like amusement. He opens and closes his mouth a few times like a blubber fish.

“No,” he says, carefully. “I was, for a while, but I had to go back for health reasons, I– *why?*”

Remus blinks and says nothing, and Sirius sighs. Deflates, a bit, as if he knows.

“Look,” he says, quieter, “If this is about what I said, in the bathroom, just forget about it. Okay? I don’t– I was drunk and taking out my anger on you, I’m sorry–”

“My mother thinks that we’re dating,” Remus blurts. Again. Sirius’ face clears completely. “And I was going to tell her that we’re not but she was so happy and earnest that I couldn’t bring myself to do it and now she’s asking me if you’re vegetarian or not because she has a turkey for Christmas dinner and I know you’re not doing anything for Christmas so, if you want, you can come to Wales with me and spend it with me and my parents and our family friends, except you’d have to pretend to be my boyfriend, but she makes a really good hot chocolate with marshmallows so, if you ask me, it’s worth it. Objectively.”

Sirius blinks.

“You could’ve given me a million and one chances,” he says, slowly, “and in absolutely none of them would I have *ever* been able to predict that that would be what you were going to say.”

“There’s also a dog,” Remus offers, dejectedly. He wants the ground to swallow him up whole.

Sirius simply stares at him.

“I need a minute to process all of that,” he says, and Remus nods.

He takes about 30 seconds.

“So, let me get this straight,” he begins, and Remus perks up, trying his absolute hardest to not look like the most pathetic man in the universe, even though he knows he is. “Your mum... thinks we’re together.”

“Yes.”

“She thinks I’m spending Christmas with you.”

“Yes.”



“You did not tell her that we are not together, and that I am not, in fact, spending Christmas with you.”

“No.”

“And so,” he continues, taking a deep breath, “now, you want me to come to your childhood home in Wales, after being mean to me for two years straight and indirectly trashing my house, and pretend to be your boyfriend in front of your whole family for an entire week?”

Remus grimaces. “...Yes?”

Sirius takes a moment. He blinks, purses his lips, takes a deep breath, and exhales.

“Okay,” he says, simply.

Remus’ mouth falls open.

“What?”

Sirius shrugs. “Sure. I’ll do it. Why not?”

Remus can think of about a million reasons as to why not, actually, but none of them seem to be apt for vocalisation at the moment.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he says. He bundles his hands into his hoodie sleeves. “Even just being around people already beats Christmas here by miles. You had me at, ‘there is a dog’, honestly.”

“She’s a Border Collie,” Remus says, on autopilot. “Her name is Fizzy.”

“I love her already.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

There is a silence. Remus stands there, letting it all sink in, and then he sort of snaps into business mode.

“We’re leaving tomorrow, then,” he says, still expecting Sirius to back out, back away; he doesn’t. He nods. “I’ll pick you up at 12. It’s a four hour drive.”

“Okay.”

“Pack for, like, a week,” Remus continues. “I think we’ll be staying until about the twenty-seventh.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Neither of them move. A bird flies overhead, tweeting against the thick, cold air.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then,” Sirius says.

“Okay.”

“Alright.”

Remus nods. Gives him that sort of awkward tight smile for when you don’t know what else to say, shoves his hands in his pockets and turns to hop down Sirius’ porch.

He doesn’t turn back, but he checks his side mirror, and Sirius is still standing there when he drives away.

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It snows the next day.

It had been on and off at the beginning of December, but it had been very light snow, then; almost sleet. The kind of snow that shocks you by being there when you open your window in the morning and shocks you by being

gone when you peep outside at lunch. Remus wakes up, and at first, he finds himself in that very same first position; brushes it off, really; until it gets to around the time that he wants to leave, Poppy in her cat carrier (quite comfortable, to be honest) and he opens the door and it's *still snowing*.

"Christ," he mutters, popping Poppy in the backseat and filling his car with his things periodically. He leaves room for Sirius in the boot, pops his cane in the footwell behind him and slides into the driver's seat with half an hour to go, aiming for a leisurely traffic-free drive up the newly-salted windy roads to pick Sirius up from his house.

Sirius opens the door as he pulls up, and is already halfway down the drive in a long, brown coat, red scarf wrapped so tightly around his neck his equally red nose could be lack of blood circulation instead of a simple reaction to the cold. Remus helps him load his stuff into the car, and tells him to whack his backpack on the backseat, entirely forgetting that Poppy is there.

He hears a gasp.

"You didn't tell me we were going to have a travelling companion?" he says, half-sarcastically, eyes bright as he slides into the passenger seat and closes the door. His cheeks are red and his hair is damp - there are snowflakes clinging to the black strands like koalas to a tree, and he runs both of his fingers through his hair. Remus watches as it melts in real time.

"Surprise," he says, dryly. Sirius laughs.

"What's her name? Or his."

"Poppy," Remus says, turning the heating way up and shrinking into his own coat while he waits for it to kick in. He turns on the windscreen wipers and begins to drive, continuing; "She's mine. My catsitter is going on a spontaneous trip to Spain for Christmas and I couldn't find anyone else in time, so she's coming with us. Last time she and Fizzy were put in the same vicinity she almost killed her, though, so godspeed to us all."

“Fizzy almost killed Poppy?”

“Poppy almost killed Fizzy.”

“Oh, dear,” Sirius laughs, turning to look at her in the backseat. Remus flits his eyes up to the mirror and sees what he’s seeing; Poppy, through the metal of the crates, curled up into a fat little ball with her favourite little stuffed goldfish toy that she has chewed so often it has gone from a brilliant orange to a murky sort of brown.

“There’s no way,” Sirius continues. “She couldn’t hurt a fly.”

Remus scoffs. “Oh, you’ll see. She’s mad.”

Sirius takes a deep breath in, leaning his head back onto the headrest, and exhales. Remus can feel the warmth tingle against his cold skin as the car heaters begin to kick in.

“She’s not the only one,” Sirius mutters, and, well. He’s not wrong.

The trip from Devon all the way across to Pembrokeshire takes about 4 hours, give or take; possibly an extra half with the beginnings of the rush hour that they’re inevitably going to get caught in, the traffic that always builds up when it begins to snow and Remus being a little bit more cautious on the icy roads. They don’t talk all that much. It’s on the cusp between marginally awkward and mildly pleasant, though Remus puts Radio 2 on for background noise and gives Sirius free reign to peruse, which he does, flicking through however many BBC’s, Magic and Capital and back whenever they play songs that aren’t to his liking (not many, to be fair, and they always seem to be the same songs that Remus doesn’t have a liking too, either, so he’s not complaining.)

They stop at a petrol station to let them both stretch their legs and for Remus to fill up the tank, which he does, and while his back is turned Sirius somehow manages to open Poppy’s cage and seduce her into niceties, somehow. He turns back and Sirius is sitting sideways out of the passenger side, Poppy loafed onto his lap quite happily.

“She just looked so *bored*,” was his explanation. Remus rolls his eyes and puts the nozzle back.

The petrol station is very much empty, and so Remus takes his opportunity, after paying for his petrol, to sit Sirius down in the car, phone in hand, Facebook open, and teach him vaguely about his family.

“So, Hope’s your mum,” Sirius is saying, fifteen minutes later, looking at a (rare) family photo with extreme concentration. Poppy is asleep on his lap. “Lyall’s your dad. And those are these two—” he points to the picture, in which his dad, gruff, goatee-clad and balding a little bit is standing with his hands around his plump mother, dark-haired in a pinafore and a smile that could wave away tsunami’s.

“Yes.”

“And this woman here is your... aunt?”

“Julia,” Remus nods, pointing to the small, wavy-haired woman with the same smile as his mother, her arms around two young girls. “Mum’s sister, so she’s a Howell. And those two girls are—”

“Jenny and Rhonda,” Sirius nods. “Her daughters.”

“Mhm. But no one really calls her Rhonda; she’s Ronnie. They don’t live far away, and they’ll probably pop in once or twice since Jenny’s home from uni for the first time in about a year and my parents will want to see her.”

“Hope, Lyall, Julia, Jenny, Ronnie,” Sirius murmurs. “Who’s this?”

Remus cranes his neck to see who he’s point at, and grins.

“That,” he says, “is Dorcas Meadows. My best friend. Our mums went to school together and she grew up living across the street from us until she moved at 14 across the country for her dad’s work. Her grandma still lives in our cul-de-sac; they’ve come back every year to spend Christmas with her since her husband died.”

“Oh,” Sirius says. He nods, as if learning something for school. Perhaps that’s how he’s treating it. “Right. Nice.”

“You’ll get the hang of it.”

Sirius nods, handing back his phone, and then he looks up at Remus and smiles. Remus, extraordinarily, finds himself smiling back.

Poppy meows.

“Oh, go back in your crate, you moody woman,” Remus mutters, picking her up out of Sirius’ lap and craning to put her back into the cage, which she goes in with only a mild fuss and one Sirius Black having to undo his seatbelt to sort of cram her in; he has cat fur all over his trousers. He brushes it off and Remus doesn’t mention it.

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The Prince of Wales bridge leads to a swift drive through Cardiff as Remus hasn’t been there in so long and misses it (Sirius, who has never been, is enraptured) leads to rocky dirt roads, passing through forests and through small towns and eventually villages until they make it, just gone five. The snow has stopped but settled and the sun has ceased to burn, and Remus can see the moon hanging over his childhood home as he drives up to it, windscreen lit up with the lights he can see entangled upon the Christmas tree through the living room window, curtains askew. He can see movement, and he almost inadvertently smiles.

The house isn’t magnificent; it’s scant more than a cottage, two bedrooms, average back garden, very wood-y and homey and shadowed by a pine tree that his mother hates for the simple fact that it messes up her front garden so much. He parks next to his dad’s beat up old truck from when he used to have to transport logs for work and the light is blinding in his eye from the hallway as soon as he steps outside, when his mum opens the red front door, smile wide and infectious.

“Remus!” she calls, clothed but in her bloody slippers, and Remus gestures for her to stay where the hell she is (because he knows that she will risk

getting frostbite on her toes to come say hi to him) while he curls and nabs his cane from the back because the cold weather is making his joints ache like his head on Saturday. He walks up to her and she pulls him in, dusting the stray snow from where it's lightly resting on his shoulders, and it's a wonder she can even reach that high; she stands at 5'6 but he stands at 6'3, courtesy of his father; she grins and shivers against his chest as the draught comes through the door.

"Oh, come in, come in," she ushers, pulling Remus into the small hallway and Sirius must have been loitering awkwardly behind him, for she bodily grabs his wrist and yanks him inside, too, shutting the door so hard the family picture hanging above it bangs a little against the beige walls. "It's freezing out there. Did you see the news, Remus? Snowstorms up and down the country for the rest of the week. Blew in from Europe; Jillian called, apparently it's even worse in Scotland—"

"Mam," Remus laughs, and Hope grins, bodily. The door to the seating room opens, and Remus gets hit with a wall of compressed warm air that makes his ears tingle happily. His dad is standing there.

"Fire's burning," he says, low and throaty, and Remus smiles. "You look like you need it."

"Hi to you too, Dad," he says, hugging him, chastely; Lyall is already speaking in his low Northern drawl before he pulls back.

"There's snacks, and your mum's making Shepherd's Pie," he says, as Remus takes a step back, "but I'm not sure how well it's gonna taste considering she's spent most of the time ignoring it in favour of looking out the window to see if yous were here yet."

"Oh, shut up," she says, completely unperturbed by her potentially burning Shepherd's Pie, distracted by something newer. Something more exciting - something shyer than Remus has ever, ever seen him.

She turns to Sirius.

“Hi, dear,” she says, gripping onto his arm and pulling him into a hug. He smiles and hugs her back, and blinks of abject surprise when she kisses his icy cheek affectionately pulling back; Remus stifles a laugh. “It’s so lovely to meet you.”

“It’s lovely to meet you too, Mrs. Lupin—”

“Ah,” she reprimands, “Call me Hope.”

Sirius smiles, and Remus can’t tell if the red is residual cold or a flush. The light is low and warm-toned, which isn’t helping, but he’s bathed in something that seems to glitter against the melting snowflakes in his hair. “Hope,” he corrects, before turning to Remus’ dad, “and…”

Lyall clears his throat. “Mr. Lupin, to you.”

“Oh, *Lyall!*”

Remus laughs, but Sirius doesn’t until his dad does and he deems it okay; Lyall reaches out a hand for him to shake before ambling back into the sitting room, and Hope puts both of her hands on the sides of Sirius’ shoulders and squeezes, affectionately. Remus practically watches Sirius melt.

“So, my shepherd’s pie is almost done, and then I think your father wants to roast chestnuts on the fire, and then hopefully before he settles in to watch *Only Fools and Horses* reruns like he does every day I’ll get him to go out and grab your stuff - unless there’s something you need?”

“Poppy’s in there,” Remus reminds her, and her jaw drops as she remembers.

“Oh, crap— I completely forgot you were bringing her this year!” She pushes past the two bodies in the narrow hallway to lean, holding onto the banister, into the seating room. “Lyall, Remus has brought Poppy. You need to go get her out of the car.”

“Fucks’ sake.”



“Oi! We have a guest, here, you wanker.”

Remus bites his lip in shock and turns to Sirius, who has his hand over his mouth, fighting a losing battle against a smile; Hope turns and rolls her eyes at the both of them.

“Miserable old man, honestly,” she mutters, pushing past again, in the direction of the kitchen. “He’s gonna go and get her now. In the meantime, Remus, your bedroom is all nice and ready. I think Fizz is up there waiting. She always knows you’re coming home when I change your sheets, the nutter,” and she trails off, muttering to herself about shepherd's pie and leaving Remus and Sirius standing awkwardly in the hallway, making eye contact and seemingly having one-sided conversations that neither of them can understand yet.

“You need my dad to get anything out of the car when he gets Poppy?”  
Remus asks.

“No.”

“Right,” he says, running a hand through his hair. “Well. I’ll show you my bedroom, then.”

“You’ll show me the dog,” Sirius corrects, behind him as Remus climbs up the stairs.

He rolls his eyes. “I’ll show you the dog.”

He does, in fact, show him the dog.

Sirius is in love with Fizzy. Immediately. Remus opens the door to his childhood bedroom, the walls cream with a maroon accent, half-dead houseplants that his mother waters sporadically lining the windowsill. There is a pot of incense and a candle or five, unlit, matchbox on his darkwood dresser, matching the rough laminate oak-coloured flooring accented by a fluffy white rug. His mum has changed his sheets; he can tell, because the pillows are uncreased and the duvet is crisp and nice even in respite of the big black and white tricolour border collie lying on the red

blanket hanging on the end of the bed, creasing it and harrying it with dog hairs immediately.

She's getting on, now, Fizzy, but she clambers off the bed with so much energy when they walk in that you'd think she was a puppy.

"Oh, my god," Sirius coos, kneeling down after Remus has had his own little reunion. He perches on the end of his bed and watches them, illuminated by the lamp in the corner. Sirius loves the dog and Fizzy loves the attention. He doesn't leave her alone for five minutes, until Fizzy comes back to Remus, clambers up (with his help) onto her lap and then circles the same spot on the duvet for a good thirty seconds before settling, looking up at them with her gorgeous, gentle brown eyes. Remus gives her an aggressive little head scratch and turns, to see Sirius, looking contemplatively around the room.

"This is your childhood room?" he asks, and Remus nods. He hums.

"What?" Remus says, accusatorily, and Sirius simply shrugs, looking all around; Remus can't fathom what is so fucking interesting.

"I like the Spider-Man poster," Sirius remarks, and Remus whirls around; and there it is, to the right side of his bed. He had forgotten it was there.

"Thank you," he says, and the room is awkward. The silence is tangible, and Sirius walks over to sit to the other side of Fizzy, scratching her head absently; she closes her eyes in bliss.

"So," he starts, and Remus turns to look at him. "What are the ground rules?"

"Ground rules?"

"Yeah," he says, as if it's obvious. "Like... affection. We're supposed to be dating, right? Can't exactly convince your family if we never touch or talk to each other."

Remus blinks. “Right. Erm—” He reaches out, in desperation of something to do with his hands to displace the awkwardness, and digs his fingers into Fizzy’s soft fur. “Well, hugs. Back hugs, and that.”

Sirius quirks an eyebrow. “Back hugs.”

“You can—” he leans back, slightly, to eye Sirius up and down; he looks slightly alarmed, for a moment, but Remus continues, “you’re smaller, so you can... you know. Sit on my lap.”

Sirius looks away, then. He doesn’t seem to be laughing; perhaps cringing, or craving sweet death.

“Yeah,” he says, digging his fingers into Fizzy’s fur with more volition. His voice is uncharacteristically high. “Your lap. Great. Yeah.”

“Kisses...”

Sirius pauses, and looks up at him. Remus bites the inside of his cheek and kneads through Fizzy’s fur.

“On the cheek,” he finishes. “We can do those. I suppose we can discuss—er, kisses on the lips in a few days, depending on how well they... take it. Lots of couples don’t kiss in front of their parents. It’s fine.”

Sirius blinks, and then nods.

“Yeah,” he echoes. Nodding slowly. “It’s fine.”

He runs his hand from the top of Fizzy’s head down her back, at the same time that Remus moves upwards, and their hands brush through the wiry black fur. They cease.

Sirius takes a moment, and then draws his hand away like it’s been burned.

They don’t get another word out before Hope is calling up the stairs; Fizzy jolts, and clambers off the bed clumsily to go squeeze herself through the little gap in the door and pad down the stairs, and Remus gets up first, leaning on his cane.

“After you,” he says, and Sirius nods, gets up, and walks downstairs without a second glance.

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Hope is infatuated with Sirius. Absolutely besotted.

Dinner starts slightly awkward, at first, with Remus filling in his parents on recent happenings; his job, his car getting MOT-ed, Lily and James heading off to Jaipur for the school break and, lastly, the Christmas party - the majority of the details omitted, of course, in favour of a lovely picturesque work-do night where no extreme alcohol consumption happened and no split lips were formed. (Sirius’ lip is still bruised, but Remus thinks he’s put on some sort of tint to match it; you can barely tell, unless you know.)

Sirius, during this, stays rather silent and simply eats his shepherd’s pie happily. That is until Remus’ parents are fully caught up (not that there was much to catch up with, considering the fact that Hope calls him every week); regardless, this ended up launching them into a very, very deep grill of Sirius; his own work (“With me, Mam, you know this,”) his own life (“Extortionate,” thinks Remus. “Uneventful,” says Sirius.) how they met (“Mam I think you’re losing the plot,”) and, finally, how long they’ve been together, which results in a spectacular moment in which Remus says three months and Sirius says six, and then the latter throws on one of his beautiful blasé smiles and says, “Oh, it’s been so swift and lovely it feels like so much longer,” which, in retrospect, was not what Remus would’ve used to save it (something along the lines of first date vs officiality would have sufficed) but his parents eat it up regardless.

There’s one moment, when the shepherd’s pie has been, for the most part, gobbled up, and Remus can see the twinkling of the Christmas lights draped over the shed out of his peripheral vision, that Hope asks Sirius a question about his own parents.

“Oh,” he says, looking at Remus for some reason - god knows why, Remus doesn’t even know the answer to this question. “I don’t— actually, I don’t... speak to either of my parents.”

“Oh,” Hope says; her face softens immediately. “You don’t speak to them by choice, or—?”

And Remus knows that his mum meant no harm by it, of course she didn’t, but the line between side-stepping and over-stepping is so thin that sometimes she gets lost in it, and Sirius looks uncomfortable. He puts on a smile and opens his mouth, to try to find the words, but Remus can see he’s struggling, and so he clears his throat, and picks up his empty plate.

“Mam,” he says, and she turns to him. “Would you want to help me out with clearing the table? Let Dad get a word in; you’ve barely let him speak all evening.”

It’s hyperbole, but it works - she scoffs, and her chair scrapes upon standing up.

“I have let him speak,” she says, turning to Remus’ father, who has his nose in a newspaper, “he’s just more bloody interested in that crossword puzzle than any of us—”

“I’ve been working on this one for three days, Hope,” Lyall says, lowering his newspaper so he can look at them through his wire-rimmed glasses, “it’s more than just a puzzle now. It’s a lifestyle.”

“Oh, you old codger,” she hisses, picking up his plate and then Sirius’ with a smile when he hands it to her. She turns, and Lyall, not even looking away from his crossword puzzle, reaches over and back-hand smacks her on the arse.

Remus covers his face with his free hand amidst Hope’s indignant, amused screeches, but he peeks through his fingers just in time to see Lyall look over to a laughing Sirius, wink at him, and turn back to his newspaper, licking his finger to turn the page as if he’s the most casual man on the planet.

Hope finishes her tirades and clinks the plates in the sink, turning on the gushing tap to rinse them off, and Remus meets Sirius’ eye. His laughter

dies down, slightly, but his smile does not. It simply morphs into something more sincere, and Remus can tell that it is a thank you.

He turns to go help his mother wash the dishes, and when he turns back Sirius has scooted up closer to his father and he has figured out the blasted and cursed seventeen across, turning out to be “*Aardvark*,” and Sirius Black might just be Lyall Lupin’s new favourite person.

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By 8pm they’re in the living room. Hope has her Monday night program to watch, which, as far as Remus can tell, is simply a trashy soap, but she’s been narrating some of the context to an intrigued Sirius who is leaning forward, now, on the arm of the sofa they’re sitting on, listening as Hope tells him some backstory about someone’s boyfriend leaving her for her twin sister and someone’s aunt pulling a classic soaps baby-swap at a hospital.

He’s enraptured.

Lyall, meanwhile, is roasting chestnuts on the fire, completely oblivious to this entire entourage.

Remus, very much liminal in this room, leans over to the oak bookshelf nestled in the sweet little corner of their cottage and picks up a book at random, which turns out to be *A Tale of Two Cities*. He’s flicking through it when Lyall serves the (cooled down) chestnuts, fully cooked, and Hope bustles off into the kitchen during the break to make hot chocolate as it’s tradition.

Sirius looks at the chestnut like it killed his firstborn.

“What are you looking at it like that for?” Remus says, laughing, and Sirius looks up; his face softens, and he realises that it wasn’t malice, but confusion.

“So, you just—” he says, turning it around in his hand, and Remus blinks at him.

“You’ve never had these before?”

Sirius scowls at him. “No?”

Remus, who grew up on roasting chestnuts on this very fire, is baffled, to say the least, but the more wary Sirius looks the more he wants to laugh (which would be rude - it’s not his fault his confused face is very, very funny) so he turns him around and takes a nut of his own.

“Look,” he says, beginning to peel off the shell. “You do it like this.”

Sirius mimics him, and the loose pieces are placed onto a little side plate on the coffee table. There’s one part that he can’t seem to get off; Remus fights a smile, watching his face screw up in effort, but he pries the chestnut out eventually. Remus raises his own.

“Cheers,” he says, and Sirius raises an eyebrow.

“Cheers?” he repeats, clinking their chestnuts together, and while Remus pops his into his mouth Sirius takes a little nibble; and then another.

“Mm,” he says, nodding, flipping it over in his hand and eating a bit more. “It’s not bad.”

“My dad loves doing them,” Remus says, quieter, so his dad - across the room, at the windowsill - doesn’t hear over the sound of the adverts. “I think it was a Christmas tradition for him as a kid. Became one for me, too, obviously.”

Sirius nods. He finishes it off - such an odd way to eat a chestnut, small, small bites, but he does it anyway, and again - and sits idly back, not commenting on anything until the adverts finish and Lyall yells “Hope, program’s back on,” and she rushes in, two cups of hot chocolate in her hands which she gives not to her husband and her son but to herself and Sirius.

He seems sort of shocked, but he gets no chance to react before;

“What happened?” Hope asks, getting back into position. Sirius leans forward. Remus hadn’t even realised he had made sure to watch for her.

“So, Casey’s gone outside in the cold to go meet Olivia for Zumba, but Geraldine has cornered her in the alley outside the shops...”

Remus picks *A Tale of Two Cities* back up. Lyall is given the command to go do the remaining two hot chocolates, which he deposits for Remus and takes his own somewhere away, his job done.

Sirius doesn’t get to take a sip of his until at least three minutes have passed, and the show has finally calmed down (Geraldine tried to cause a scene in the street, but Ross shut her down, good old Ross). He picks up his deep red mug, wrapping tender hands around it, blows, and then takes a sip.

He swallows. Smacks his lips, processes. And then he turns to Remus.

“Holy *shit*,” he whispers, and Remus, completely despite himself, grins.

“I told you it was good.”

Sirius takes another sip, and the three minutes must have cooled it down to the perfect temperature. He closes his eyes in some sort of euphoric glaze and Remus has to fight a laugh again - he doesn’t know why this fills him with so much joy.

“Fuck me, this is so *good*,” he whispers, and then turns; “Hope, your hot chocolate is amazing.”

“Thank you, love!” she says, smiling, her hands crossed into her lap and feet tunnelled toastily underneath a blanket. Fizzy comes in and pads across to the sofa - both Remus and Sirius reach out to pet her, and she nuzzles up against both of their knees before settling at Sirius’ feet. He’s ecstatic.

“She likes you more than me,” Remus comments. Sirius scoffs, and goes to scratch Fizz behind the ears.

“You’ve got Poppy,” he murmurs, smiling as she tilts her head back, stroking under her chin. “Let me have her. I always wanted a dog.”



“Weren’t allowed?”

Sirius exhales out of his nose. “Mum said she was allergic.”

Remus frowns. “She *said* she was allergic?”

“Mhm,” Sirius says; the TV has gone to a quieter scene, now, so they’ve lowered their voices to match so as not to disturb Hope. “She lied, of course. Just didn’t want the muck. We were enough to contend with, apparently.”

Remus doesn’t reply to that with any more than a hum of acknowledgement, though the concept of *contending* with a child leaves a strange feeling in his gut that he’s not sure he likes.

Sirius breaks him out of his thought bubble with a red mug held up.

“Cheers?” he says, raising his eyebrows. Remus picks up his own mug.

“Cheers.”

They clink. Geraldine causes a fight to break out at the local pub and a girl gets stabbed with a shard of a bottle of Bacardi. It is, all around, a huge mess.

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Hope releases them at 10:30, with a promise of breakfast as long as they get up after 8am, because she has to walk Carol’s blasted dogs early tomorrow. Remus laughs, promises that they’ll wait for her, and gives her a kiss on the cheek as she turns up to bed, and then she turns to Sirius, who doesn’t seem to know what to expect even after six hours of Hope Lupin - of course she pulls him into a hug. She would not settle for anything less.

She kisses his cheek, and he laughs. It’s nervous but it’s content, Remus thinks, and that’s... nice. It’s nice that his parents make him comfortable. He knows he’s lucky to have them.

Remus is halfway up the stairs when he realises that he and Sirius never discussed sleeping situations.

Poppy is asleep on the end of the bed (of course she is) and Lyall had brought their suitcases up at some point after dinner. Remus lets Sirius shower first, telling him how the system works and perking a keen ear to hear for the running water that comes after a minute or two, satisfied that he figured it out, and he begins to sift through his things. He pulls out the Christmas presents he bought for his parents - nothing big, they do more small and sentimental than flashy and fervent - and hides them in his wardrobe, and sort of ambles about for a bit until the door opens and Sirius comes in, face flushed from the hot water, hair still wet and slick but towel-dried enough that it's not dripping on the floor. He's wearing a hoodie and pyjama bottoms, and he looks awfully small and soft, arms wrapped around himself for warmth in the bitter cold months.

"Is there, erm, a plug socket around here?" he says, holding his phone up and brandishing it; Remus directs him to the plug socket just beside his bed and he plugs it in while Remus gathers his things for his own shower.

He spends quite a while in the shower, unwinding. The water pressure at home has never been the best but it's nice enough that it hits his back and seems to untie windsor knots in his neck, down his back, muscles and joints that are tense and taut. Warm water has always been a saviour of his, since he was seventeen; the way that a hot bath alleviates his soreness is something godly, Remus thinks, but it's much too late for a bath and the shower does the trick easy enough that he gets out feeling lighter and sleepier than before.

The room hits him with a breadth of cold air when he re-enters, in a simple loose grey shirt and plaid pyjama bottoms, and Sirius is lounging on his bed, scrolling through his plugged-in phone.

He looks up, and inhales sharply. Remus nods his acknowledgement and goes to the mirror to towel-dry his hair properly; he hears Sirius exhale, slowly, and when he turns back he's cross-legged and staring very, very intently at his phone.

“So,” Remus says, breaking the ice; Sirius looks up at him. “We didn’t talk about sleeping arrangements.”

Sirius blinks; he looks slightly confused. “Okay.”

“I mean, the bed’s a double,” Remus says, quickly, “there’s not a spare room but I can kip on the sofa if you’d really like, I can make myself get up earlier to plod up here so my parents don’t–”

“Stop, stop, stop,” Sirius says, shaking his head avidly. He looks up at Remus with some sort of amused indignation about him. “Why on *earth* would I make you do that?”

Remus falters. He shrugs.

“No,” Sirius says, chuckling to himself, “It’s *your* bloody bed, I’m not gonna kick you out of it–”

“You’re the guest,” Remus interjects. “And you’re only here because of me.”

“Oh, yes,” Sirius says, properly amused now, “and sleeping in this nice, spacious double bed with you is going to absolutely *ruin* my Christmas holiday. I will *never* recover from this.”

Remus stares, mouth slightly ajar, not knowing Sirius well enough to discern his sense of humour - the other man sighs.

“Seriously. It’s not a big deal. You sleeping on the sofa would be a catastrophic hassle for no good reason when there’s enough room up here - and your mum apparently gets up at the bumhole of dawn anyway - so just–” he pulls the duvet from the other side of the bed open. The crisp, newly washed sheets deflate slowly in on themselves, and Remus nods, turning off the big light and making his way across to the side of the bed that Sirius just opened up. The only light is from the lamp on Sirius’ side table, and Remus clambers in, awkwardly, his own phone fully charged on his side table where he left it displaying the time as 11:32.

He turns on his side, facing away from Sirius, and bundles up into the duvet. He closes his eyes and he sees red from the reflection of the lingering lamplight; it's on for a minute, maybe two, and Remus can hear Sirius typing until he stops and he hears a click and then a phone being placed face-down on a table.

The light turns off, and the bed dips as Sirius reclines himself, shifting and moving around to get into a position that he's comfortable; he must find it, because he stops moving, and there is silence. Not even owls are hooting. Not even a pin is dropped.

And Remus doesn't know that he craves the small "Goodnight," that Sirius offers him, shared to an open, dismal little childhood bedroom until he gets it. Doesn't really know why, either. He falls asleep before he comes up with an answer, but he falls asleep light.

## iv

Hope makes pancakes. An abundance of pancakes.

“Jesus Christ,” is what Sirius mutters at around 9:13am when he walks into the kitchen to basically every single pancake-topping (including gravy) laid out on the table, circled around a stacked-high plate of pancakes so severe that Remus feels like he could sell it as a miniature leaning tower of Pisa and get away with it.

Hope beams from behind a pan.

“Mam, there’s only four of us,” he says, half-laughing, as she gestures to the pile of plates and Sirius bounds forward to nab one.

“Tuck in,” she tells him. “Lyall won’t be up for another hour odd, he can have your scraps. This is the last one. At least, I think.”

“You think?” Remus pushes, going back to the fact that there are fifteen pancakes on that plate and only four humans present to digest them; Hope rolls her eyes.

“Your dad can eat half of those,” she reminds him. “I thought I’d make an abundance just in case you also nabbed yourself a human hoover.”

“He didn’t,” Sirius pipes up, spreading nutella on his pancake already, “but I might just have to make an exception for you, Hope.”

She turns, and he winks. Remus stares.

Schmoozer.

Hope laughs, and sautees her pan, throwing the now-solid pancake around a bit. “If you’re not now, you will be soon enough. The Howell’s are notorious for their way with a frying pan, don’t forget that.”

“You’ve heard of the baby-trap,” Remus says, blithely, with a dry hand flourish, “now prepare for: the food trap. Courtesy of Hope Howell and all of her progeny.”

“Why are you saying *all* as if you’re not my only child?”

Remus shrugs, sitting down and taking a pancake from the top of the pile. “I don’t know what sort of out-of-wedlock debauchery you got up to before I was born. *Barely* a year after you met Dad, might I add.”

She smacks him round the head with a tea towel. Sirius blinks at them, chewing on his pancake, seemingly enraptured with this alien dynamic; his alien mother.

“Little bastard,” Hope mutters, flipping the pancake. Remus grins and pours so much more golden syrup than necessary.

Lyall does get up about an hour later, after Sirius has had two and Remus has had an impressive four – and he does eat basically the rest. There’s three left. Hope takes one of them out to the chickens in the coop in the back garden and Fizzy sits patiently at Sirius’ feet, tail thumping a mile a minute on the hardwood floor.

“Can she have some?” he asks, and Remus shrugs an affirmation. Sirius tucks his hair behind his ears and tears a little piece of the pancake off. Turns back to Fizzy, whose eyes are wide and beseechingly on the egg-flour concoction.

Sirius hovers it, sort of apprehensively, above her head, and then throws it with a slight jolt. Fizzy jumps back and catches it in her mouth, and then proceeds to go fucking mental.

“Oi, Fizz,” Remus calls, laughing as she spins in circles, elated by this strange new sustenance. Her claws scratch on the floor as she turns, tail wagging, and Remus holds out a finger. “Sit.”

She sits. Sirius tears another part of the pancake off, and she bum shuffles towards him, making him laugh, but evidently learning that calm = food

and staying it. He holds it for a second and then throws it once again, and she catches it and chews, standing and wagging her tail happily. Sirius smiles.

“You can give it to her out of the palm of your hand, too, if you want,” Remus says, idly. He’s not entirely sure why. There’s no reason except a sort of ache that tells him Sirius is not familiar with dogs but wants to be, never had a dog but wanted one, and Fizz is the most genuinely lovely being he has ever encountered on this hellish earth (sorry to Poppy, she’s just a bitch sometimes) so he thinks, *well, who else to learn with.*

Sirius raises his eyebrows. Fizzy perks her ears. It’s a comedic scene.

“Point and tell her to sit,” Remus urges, quietly, and Sirius turns back to her. He holds the pancake strip in one hand and points with his other.

“Sit,” he says, and she does. Her tail thumps and her eyes lock on the food. Remus’ foot taps and his eyes lock on the way that Sirius smiles.

“Now hold it open, in front of her,” he says, demonstrating, and Sirius does, like a stop sign. “Tell her to stay.”

“Stay,” he says. Her tail calms down, still thumping but less spectacularly. Sirius looks to Remus.

“Keep your hand up and give her it slowly,” Remus says. There would be no repercussions if Sirius were to drop his hand and give her it quickly. She’d simply be a bit more enthusiastic, or accidentally aggressive and Remus doesn’t want Sirius to have to deal with aggression. He’s too timid in his sleep-worn pyjama bottoms and his cozy hoodie with his unfamiliar companion to have to deal with aggression.

He does. He puts the bit of pancake in his hand and lowers it to Fizzy’s eye level, and then underneath her jaw, and she leans forward and eats it out of the palm of his hand. She’s gentle and thankful with her recommencing of the tail thumping and Sirius smiles so very brightly and pets her, rough on the head with both hands. She stands up and burrows her way in between his thighs, and then jumps up so her front paws are resting on his knees.

Sirius jumps, and Remus tuts and snaps his fingers at her to get down.

“Sorry,” Remus murmurs, when she’s down and happily sat at his feet again (after doing a little turn of the room in her excitement, of course). Sirius looks at him, and shakes his head.

“It’s okay,” he says. He scratches the top of her head. “I like her.”

Fizzy jumps up again. Sirius gasps, hesitates, and then leans forward and continues to pet her. Remus doesn’t tell her to get down; that is, until she steals the remaining half of the pancake in its entirety right off of his plate. Sirius laughs for five minutes straight.

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Hope takes them out to town for lunch. Lyall works through the day and Hope schmoozes up to him enough to persuade him to drop them in the town centre on his way on the promise they’ll get the bus back, and so he does. They drive up the scenic roads, past trees and cottages and couples with kids barely old enough to walk, swinging between their arms with bright blue gloves and sun red bobble hats, and Sirius is quiet the whole journey. He stares out of the window and seems to almost people-watch. He seems to be embracing the little village, the park that they drive by that Remus and Dorcas used to hang out in as a child, just as a kid that can’t be older than ten goes down the slide so aggressively she ends up in the slush, shrieking with laughter. They pass by the football field next to Remus’ primary school in which there are approximately five and a half snowmen (one of the wounded soldiers has lost his head, poor sod) and Sirius sees approximately six dogs and gasps at every single one, pressing his leather gloved hand to the glass as Hope prattles on about something or other over the deep voice of Michael Ball hosting BBC Radio 2.

Lyall drops them a few streets away from where Hope wants to be, and so they walk. It’s not really icy, more slushy; the snow has stopped coming down, but it stuck, leaving the streets layered in regal white gloss and leaving Remus’ toes tingling with the cold, and they walk slowly for the benefit of all of them - for Hope, in her age, for Remus, with his cane and for Sirius who absolutely did not wear appropriate shoes. They walk, arms



linked, with Sirius in the middle and the Lupin's to either side of him. He and Hope make idle conversation and Remus listens, sniffing in the cold and squinting when the wind brushes him. Sirius has a tight grip on his upper arm and Remus holds him tightly back. The snow is rather dangerous at points.

Once they get to the main bustle of the crowds it's better, for the ground has been salted and walked upon and it's nothing more than a white carpet. Remus' shoes crunch into the snowy floor and he tugs his hat down over his freezing ears as Hope takes Sirius on a sort of guided tour of the main centre, the square and its cobbles, its coffee shops and its culture. There's a statue of a dog that Sirius' jaw drops at and a busker with a twelve string guitar that he hops over and gives a fiver to. He comes back to walk next to Remus and Hope is to the side of them, walking in the dead center of the walkway, lined brown and white buildings with shops built into the bottom and apartments into the top on either side of them; the occasional Christmas tree or wreath in the little windows underneath the thatched roofs, chimney's smoking, white and grey and brown brickwork. Sirius comes to walk next to him and their hands brush.

Remus inhales, sharply, and turns to look at him. Sirius looks at him back, lips slightly parted. Remus can't tell if he did it intentionally or if it was an accident, but he can tell what they're both thinking, now. Do what's expected of you. There's a couple walking up the street to the right of them, now, full-to-the-brim Primark bags in one hand, the other firmly interlocked with their counterparts in the small, warm space between their layered bodies. Their gloves are red and navy blue; his are black and Sirius' are leather. They pass the couple, and Remus takes his hand.

He tries to make it look as nonchalant as possible, because Hope is turning around, and two people who are dating should look nonchalant when engaging in activities that dating people do. They continue walking and Sirius' neck turns forward so fast Remus is sure he must've clicked it - he pushes his fingers in the spaces between Sirius' and their hands squeeze together. Remus' is bigger than his. It feels like he's engulfing him. He's a little smaller, too, so it's sort of an awkward angle for his shoulder to droop,

but it's not all that bad. His hand fits quite well, actually. And it's warm around his thinly fabric-ed black fingertips.

Hope turns from where she's taken them over, a little bit, and moves to walk next to Sirius. It's genial and she smiles and Remus can tell her smile is a bit brighter watching them hold hands. Swinging them, even, a little bit as Sirius looks around and takes in the gorgeous architecture, the benches and the half-walls and the little monument that they're coming up to, a stone spire with a cross on the top. It's all rather picturesque. They're holding hands and it's all picturesque. The sun is even shimmering, barely but she's there from behind a heavy snow-infused cloud, and the lingering snow glistens like a coat over roofs and gutters and the edges of signposts that haven't been poked or trodden on, and they're holding hands until the moment that Hope ushers them into her favourite little vegan cafe; they're holding hands until the moment they're not. And it's picturesque.

They go shopping. Hope takes them to Primark, in which she buys a parka that she's wanted for ages and Sirius saunters off to the home section and comes back with four candles and a little succulent. They weave in and out of shops including a little jewellers for Hope to get her bracelet fixed and an independent bookstore, in which Remus picks up *Anna Karenina* and *The Death of Ivan Ilych* in a set for £2, which he thinks is a steal, to be quite honest. Sirius asks to go into a little arts and crafts and novelties store that they see with a rainbow retail display and he finds a pop-up Viking history book, which he buys, resolute to give to Harry for Christmas and get him to like History instead of "*boring, horrid Chemistry like his stupid Dad*" (complete with a disgusted shudder that makes Remus laugh, god damn him.)

They hold hands, again, on the walk through town to the bus stop. It's a ten minute walk done majorly in silence. Remus doesn't really mind the silence. Hope gets a phone call from Carol about god-knows-what (some sort of plans cancellation that has Hope gasping and talking shit about an unnamed woman) and they get to the little bus shelter and sit, and it takes them maybe a second too long to drop each others hands when they're no longer required to be holding them.

Remus is walking up his drive, listening to the jangle of keys as Hope gets them ready to open the front door, when someone calls his name.

“Oh, my god,” he mutters, turning to Sirius, who frowns, and then turning around.

“Remus Lupin, you motherfucker!”

Dorcas Meadows is charging towards him, the beads in her Fulani braids clanking against each other as her coat flutters behind her and the bobble on top of her thick red hat bounces back and forth. There's a gorgeous blonde woman behind her in a thick, navy scarf, snow in her hair, but she only captures Remus' attention for two seconds before it is captured, again, hilariously by Dorcas, who gets halfway across the road that centers their little cul-de-sac and then slips and falls tremendously on her arse.

Remus' jaw drops, and he makes his way over, Sirius on his tail.

The blonde woman has already gotten there by the time he does and is helping her up; Dorcas doesn't look hurt, if Remus knows anything about her he knows that her ego will just be bruised, but she's smiling. The blonde woman is laughing, too, laughing at her, and Dorcas sticks her tongue out at her as Remus gets within arms reach and then she is projecting herself into his arms, on her tiptoes to match his height and swaying him back and forth.

“Hi,” she murmurs into his neck, gripping her hands onto his shoulderblades from where they're thrown over his shoulders. Her face is freezing and she presses her cheek into his neck, making Remus squirm, and laugh, and then she laughs, and he squeezes her from where he's holding her by the waist and then picks her up and spins on his heel. She laughs, again, and he is so happy.

“When did you get back?!” he asks, completely enraptured in her, his best friend, and she's laughing, her breath foggy and tangible in the cold. He realises he hasn't seen her in almost a year. A whole year.

“An hour or so ago,” she says, slightly breathless.

She doesn't have gloves on and she cups his face - she knows exactly what she's fucking doing - and when Remus shrieks and squirms away she throws her head back and cackles in the way that she used to when they were teenagers, in the way that would signal to their parents that they were still up when they were definitely supposed to be asleep, and Remus is so happy.

"Get your icicle hands *away*—" he groans, and she wiggles her fingers in his face - he slaps them away. She laughs. He laughs. Remus remembers that there's more people than just the two of them in the world, and his eyes fall on the blonde.

She's smiling at the scene, her hands tucked into her pockets and her blonde waves flattened by a black hat, covering her ears. Her nose is red and she's sniffly. Her eyes are a dark, warm brown. Remus notices that her navy blue scarf has little yellow stars embroidered into it. She's looking at Dorcas like she is a star herself.

"I thought you were coming back tomorrow?" Remus asks, and she grins.

"Change of plans. It was originally tomorrow 'cause this one," she points a thumb at the blonde, "couldn't get off work, but they let her go for the holidays at the last minute 'cause they got snowed in, so we thought we'd come and surprise everyone."

"Surprised I am," Remus says, smiling. He turns to her.

"You remember I told you about that girl I met on the plane from Cardiff to Spain in June?" Dorcas asks, and a lightbulb flashes over Remus' head.

"Ah!" he says, his name evading him. "This is—"

"Remus, this is Marlene," she says, turning to Marlene and gesturing. "My girlfriend."

And then she signs something to her, and Marlene nods and grins. She turns and extends a hand to Remus, which he takes, shaking, smiling. She has a

gorgeous smile, and Remus remembers perhaps the most pertinent part of the story that Dorcas told him in June, being that she is deaf.

Dorcas smiles, and then her eyes land on what Remus knows is Sirius, standing slightly behind him. Remus turns, and Sirius is watching them. He doesn't look nervous, just slightly awkward. Remus blinks, and then holds out a hand, and Sirius blinks, and then takes it, stepping forward, and he can't tell if they look painfully awkward because Remus knows that they're faking it or if they just look painfully awkward. If they do, Dorcas and Marlene don't show it on their faces.

"This is Sirius," Remus says, squeezing his hand. "My boyfriend."

Dorcas' mouth falls slightly open in shock, but she recovers quickly; she reaches out a hand for Sirius to take, which he does, shaking it with a smile.

"It's lovely to meet you," he says, and she smiles.

"You too," she says, and then he turns to Marlene, who turns to Dorcas. She signs two fingers from her forehead around to her chin and Dorcas links her pinkies together, and then Sirius interrupts.

"Can I— she speaks BSL?" he asks, to Dorcas, and she nods. Marlene blinks. And then Sirius turns to her and begins signing, rapidly, and her mouth falls open.

She takes a moment and then she grins, and signs something back. It's very fast paced and her expressions are vivid, and so are Sirius', and Remus didn't even know he knew sign language. Dorcas is watching them talk, a sort of disbelieving smile on her face. Marlene signs something and Sirius nods, grinning, and then he signs something back and she laughs.

Remus shudders.

"Okay, let's continue this inside," Dorcas says, putting her hand on Marlene's shoulder and then signing what Remus assumes is that but in BSL, "I'm freezing my bollocks off." And, you know what, Remus is too.

“They’re icicles,” Remus moans, and Dorcas laughs and tugs him, linking their arms, towards the warmth of the Lupin cottage.

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Remus is beginning to think that Sirius simply enamours everybody that he meets.

The little Lupin cottage is packed for the night, and he’s enamoured every single one of them. He gets on like a house on fire with Dorcas, though Remus supposed that was to be expected; they share the same colourful, electric bleeding energy (he hadn’t realised how much Sirius reminded him of Dorcas until they met) and bounce off each other like oil to a flame (he’s not sure how he can love Dorcas all his life and hate Sirius for the two years they’ve known each other when they’re so similar but he tries hard not to think about it).

Remus’ mum teams up with Dorcas’ mum, Rory (the loveliest little woman to exist on the face of the planet. Her hair is in Bantu Knots and she’s wearing a forest green cashmere shawl over flared blue jeans and she gave Remus five kisses on the cheek and squeezed the absolute bloody fucking daylight out of him when they came inside) and they make lasagna for dinner, just in time for Lyall to get home. He pops round to help Dorcas’ grandmother, Winnie, cross the icy streets alongside Martin, Dorcas’ dad and Winnie’s son. Winnie is an eighty-something year old woman who cannot walk very far anymore but has so much fire left inside of her that she is placed in the rocking chair besides the coal and mimics it, cracking jokes and grinning and beckoning Remus over to give him forehead kisses and telling him that she remembers when he was just a little boy, just a wee one, playing in her back garden and wreaking havoc. It’s a sweet reunion. She hasn’t got many years to go but she’s making the absolute most of them, Winnie.

She falls into reading the paper and Remus gets comfortable on the sofa while dinner is being prepared. Martin (who is a tall, tall man with a goatee and a beer belly) almost immediately starts up a game of poker with Lyall on the coffee table and they all become sort of strangely invested.

(Martin wins) (Remus put £5 on it and Dorcas' pocket is heavier by the end of the night).

And Sirius enamours them all. Every single one. He somehow slots into the little family dynamic so easily it throws Remus for a whiplash-inducing loop; when Hope has him taste-test her sauce, when Lyall passes him today's crossword and sits beseechingly as Sirius sits tapping a pen against his face until he gets thirteen down, *Tiramisu*. When the fire is taking a little bit too long to heat them up and so Dorcas makes hot chocolates and they discover that they both enjoy cinnamon in their drinks (to which Remus calls them boujee, though of course, Sirius is more than just boujee). When the conversation is flowing and Sirius makes a sly, comedic remark that has Rory howling, so much so that she chokes on her drink and then she simply laughs harder at the fact she's choking. When Sirius and Martin go for the same Quality Street flavour (the little green triangle, to be exact) and he gives him an affirming nod and a fist bump. When Marlene's feet get cold and so he bundles them up in the blanket on his lap as if they've been friends for years and not mere hours, and then ends up tickling her feet so much that she's laughing, breathless, kicking him so hard in the stomach he keels over. Marlene has tears in her eyes when he reaches a hand up and flips her off. Even Remus can recognise that sign.

Even Remus. Even Remus. He's watching this from the other sofa while the smell of lasagna comes from the kitchen and Hope is screeching at Lyall to "get out of my kitchen, you useless fool" with a background of domestic laughter, and Sirius sits up, flips his hair. His face is red and his tongue is caught between his teeth, his smile blinding, devastatingly happy. He throws his head onto the back of the sofa, and pushes Marlene's feet off of his lap. She puts them back there, and he gives her a threatening look. Signs something, and she pulls her knees straight to her chest in faux-fear, causing them both to laugh, and Remus doesn't realise that he is enamoured too, him too, him too until Dorcas pokes him in the thigh and tells him that it's his go in Monopoly; he had forgotten they were even playing.

Dinner is loud, and rambunctious, and warm. Hope has hung some sort of magnet wreath on the fridge and the metal door frame in which they keep their Christmas cards clangs every time someone opens or closes it. Sirius

sits beside Remus, who sits beside Dorcas, who sits beside her grandmother and her parents and then Remus' parents and then Marlene and then back round to Sirius and they've had to pull out the table because there's too many people, and Lyall is sitting on the rocking chair that slots into the corner of the room after *rudely* shoving Poppy off of it (she's now on Remus' lap) and it's all *smiles*. All conversation. Remus learns about Rory's office drama, about the period show Winnie has been watching that Marlene has, in a weird coincidence, been watching too (Remus learns she has an affinity for trashy Jane Austen/Brontë sisters adaptations and gives her a coy high five in solidarity).

Remus hears the story of how Dorcas and Marlene met again when it is relayed to his parents. About how they were on the same flight from Cardiff to Granada - Dorcas going on a work trip, Marlene going on a holiday with her sister - and then the same flight back a week later, the fucking odds of it all. How they exchanged numbers and found they lived marginally close to each other and that it's practically been smooth sailing ever since. Remus finds out that Marlene loves children but doesn't want any of her own, and thus spent her early twenties after achieving a nursing degree working in a children's hospital until she saw something on the internet and signed up to the NRCPD to be something called a Deaf Relay Interpreter; in which she is a part of a system that helps deaf children with either a mental or physical health condition that affects their comprehension of language, translating a hearing interpreters BSL into the modified form of it that the child requires. Remus thinks she's amazing, and, evidently, so does Dorcas. She can't keep her eyes off of her.

They find out that the three of them all went to Cardiff University at the same time, Marlene just one year ahead, which he finds astounding. The conversation flows into university talk - jeers at Dorcas (not maliciously, she can take it) about her Architecture degree just lying about, honestly completely useless in her current career path of journalism. Sirius went to the University of Edinburgh and Remus finds out he actually went to University with James, who had notified Sirius of the job opening at their school at a point in Sirius' life when he was very much in a purgatorial plane of where to go next. It had seemed like divine intervention.



He looks at Remus, purposefully, when he says this.

His eyes are soft and the curve of his lip is golden. Dorcas smiles into her lasagna, and Remus feels his whole body freeze up and then thaw in the time between his fleeting gaze and Sirius' pretty eyelashes blinking, blinking away; he's good. Remus has to hand it to him, he's good at this. He's good at pretending. They all seem sold on it, on him; so sold that Remus is actually rather sad when he thinks about the fact that they're going to have to fake break up, that it is inevitable. He's so good he almost has Remus fooled.

Dorcas and her dad help Remus' mum wash up in a hilarious relay of scrape-wash-dry, while Remus helps Winnie back into living room and gets caught up in a conversation about what he teaches at school (she used to be a primary school teacher) for a solid amount of time while he gets the fire going again. He slips back into the kitchen quietly when they're just about done with the washing and Martin is complaining that his hands are dry; he slips into the kitchen just in time to watch Sirius and Marlene descend into a snowball fight outside, bare hands, barely a coat on.

"What the hell are they doing?" Remus asks, laughing, looking over Dorcas' shoulder as she passes two end plates to her dad.

"They were letting Fizzy out for a wee," Dorcas supplies. Remus cranes his neck and sure enough, there's Fizzy, paw-deep in the snow and bounding between the two of them, jumping on Sirius and—*ah*—there it is. She's knocked him over.

Hope bursts out laughing, and so does Marlene.

"Daft idiots," Dorcas says, fondly, sorting out some cutlery and watching them through the window with heavy-lidded, soft eyes, and Remus finds a smile on his face and wonders where the hell that came from.

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He is rummaging through his luggage for his slippers when the door opens, and Sirius walks in.

Remus bursts out laughing and forces himself to stop so quickly it was almost robotic, hand over his mouth; Sirius closes his eyes and laughs anyway.

He's soaked. Basically head to toe. The tips of his droopy curls are not dripping, but they definitely were not long ago. His shirt is soaked and so are his trousers and his cheeks are cherry, rose, maple leaf red, incredibly splotchy against his pale skin. His nose is red, and he sniffs aggressively.

"Well," Remus says, pursing his lips and pulling his slippers out from where they were embedded through a pair of pants and a shirt. "That was a bit of a silly idea, wasn't it?"

"Don't *patronise* me," Sirius says, looking like he wants to move, but he's not, because there's nothing *really* for him to do in here. Logically, he should've gone to the bathroom for towels - for a shower, probably. Remus wants to tell him this, but some part of him refuses to. He laughs, instead. A sharp breath.

"Is Marlene at least as wet, too?" he asks, and Sirius groans.

"No," he replies, pulling his collar back. It's sticking to his chest. If it were white, Remus might have a problem, but it's black, so he's fine. "She didn't fall over. Because of your evil dog."

"Hey!" Remus laughs. "I thought she was your best friend."

Sirius huffs out of his nose. "She's on strike one."

"*Maybe* you shouldn't have gone out with no gloves on," Remus' eyes move down to his fingers, which are red and raw, "or coat, or hat or anything."

"Or, *maybe* your dog is evil."

Remus tuts at his drama. "You'll love her again in an hour."

Sirius shrugs, and leans against the doorframe. He shudders. Remus stands up, slides into his slippers, and looks at him.

He's very pretty, Sirius Black. Very pretty, and very cold. He shudders, viscerally, and Remus groans.

"Oh, come here," he says, walking towards him; Sirius slides to the other side of the door, and Remus grabs his damp wrist and pulls him into the bathroom. Sits him on the edge of the bath.

He has a small towel and is rubbing at Sirius' hair like he's Fizzy before Sirius can even protest.

"Mmmff—" he groans, muffled by the towel, and then he laughs. "Jesus Christ—"

"Remus will do," replies Remus, and Sirius laughs, actually. Actually. Remus pulls the towel down the lengths of his hair, pulling it down to its full extent. It bounces back into its curl pattern, but it's less wet, now. He puts the towel around Sirius' neck, and reaches over him to put the plug in the bath.

"What're you doing?"

"Running you a bath," Remus replies, as if it's obvious, which it should be. "It'll be a bit traumatising if you get frostbite and die next to me in the night. And having to give a police statement is always a hassle."

"He says as if he does it every other week," Sirius remarks, as a mutter, and Remus grins. He suppresses it before he pulls back and Sirius can see him. He's smiling too.

"I could," he says, indignant. Sirius rolls his eyes. "You don't know what sort of delinquency I get up to on my weekends."

"Let me guess," Sirius says. Remus stands back and raises an eyebrow, bubble bath in hand. Sirius hums. "I'm going to guess that you spent this past weekend... sitting on your sofa, with a cup of tea in your hand and your cat on your lap, watching... hmmm... *Pride and Prejudice*, 1995."

And, well, Remus can't exactly tell him that he spent this past weekend thinking about him, and only thinking about him.

"Fuck you," he says, with a tone of disbelief laced into his voice; Sirius raises his eyebrows. "All the way down to the adaptation."

His face lights up. "Are you serious?"

"Yes," Remus laughs, and it's not even a full *lie* is the funny thing, really, 'cause he really did rewatch that adaptation about a month ago, cat in lap, tea in hand, Firth in eyes. "It's the best one!"

Sirius hums. "I prefer the movie."

"It's brilliant, yes, but '95 is just so authentic—"

"'05 has Keira Knightley," Sirius argues. "And Macfadyen. And the rain scene. And the *hand flex*. '*You have bewitched me body and soul*,' etcetera, etcetera, '*your hands are cold*'..."

Remus' eyes can't help but flicker down, briefly, to Sirius' own cold hands. If they've warmed up, he can't tell. He's holding them tight together in his lap. The running bath water whooshes in one ear and out the other.

"Colin Firth," he says, slowly, "in the wet white shirt."

Sirius stares him down.

"Alright," he breathes, after a moment. "You got me there."

Remus laughs, actually.

"I know I did," he says, and Sirius scowls at him, but there doesn't seem to be any heat. And the bath is filling up pretty swiftly, and it's only hot water, so Remus leans forward to dip a brief finger in and then turns on the cold tap. Sirius shuffles sideways to accommodate him, and Remus knows that there's no reason why Sirius can't run his own bath, but he's started it, so he might as well finish it.

“Your family are amazing,” Sirius says, quietly, and Remus knows he’s talking about more than just his parents. He swishes a hand in the cooling water to distribute the salts and nods.

“They are,” he says, leaning back. His back hurts from bending, so he kneels down beside Sirius.

“Do you want me to do it?”

“No,” he says. “I’m fine.”

“Sure? I’m just sitting here.”

“Continue to sit,” Remus says, as authoritatively as he can muster, and that draws Sirius back into silence for the good, long part of half a minute. He’s one of those people who fills silences. Remus is discovering a lot about him today.

“Dorcas is brilliant,” he says. “The town is gorgeous. You really grew up here?”

Remus wants to laugh at the fact that he’s asking, as if he would lie about his hometown, but he senses it’s not really the time.

“Yeah,” he says, simply. “I was lucky. It wasn’t perfect - secluded young gay Welsh boy growing up in a secluded Welsh town in the nineties breeds high school disasters, you can imagine - but in general I grew up around amazing people.”

“Your parents were accepting?” Sirius asks, timidly. “Dorcas and... her family and all?”

“Yeah,” Remus says, turning off the cold tap. “They were amazing. No one close to me wasn’t accepting. It was just the rough and tumble yobs at school. I wasn’t even *out*, I just *looked* gay.”

Sirius laughs, a sharp exhale through his nose. He tugs at the ends of his hair, and says “I know how that feels.”

Remus looks at him, nods. Turns back to his bath and turns the tap off. Dips a finger in, deems it just a little bit too cold. Turns the tap back on. Sirius is quiet throughout all of this.

“Yours weren’t, were they?” Remus asks, quietly. A murmur into the echoey room. He doesn’t make eye contact with Sirius. He doesn’t think he wants him to.

The only sound is running water.

“Thank you,” Sirius says. It’s a soft thing. He’s a soft thing. “For yesterday.”

Remus knows immediately that he means what happened at dinner.

“Mam’s hearts in the right place,” Remus says, “she just forgets boundaries sometimes.”

“She’s lovely,” Sirius says, automatically, almost as if he’s ashamed of having boundaries with people he’s just met, as if his uncomfortability was his fault. Remus wants to tell him that it’s not and then tell him again, and again. “It’s just... touchy.”

“That’s fine,” Remus says, as nonchalant as he can manage. He feels like he’s handling something delicate. Sirius is not delicate, but perhaps whatever they’re forming here is. “That’s okay.”

He looks at Sirius, turning the tap off, and then pushing himself up using the rim of the bathtub. His joints ache, but it’s nothing he’s not used to. Sirius looks up at him, and smiles.

And then, because Remus feels like it’s not over, that the conversation doesn’t end there, *can’t* end there, he says, “You don’t... you don’t have to give anyone more of yourself than you want to.”

Sirius blinks at him. The heat, the steam from the bath is fogging up the mirror and the window and he can’t still be cold, there’s no way, but his cheeks are still red. They’re pretty. He is pretty. He has an abyss in his eyes,

a mansion, a haunted loch. Remus has never cared much for swimming, but he thinks he might like a paddle.

“What if,” Sirius says into the quiet, soft and timid, “I want to give more of myself to some people, but I don’t know... how.”

Remus inhales, slowly. In through his nose, out through his mouth. He contemplates this, fingertips buzzing, skin warm and tangible and caressed by the false balm.

“You don’t have to give anyone more of yourself than you’re *ready* to,” he amends, slowly, analytically thinking it through, caressing the delicacy. “Weaving memoirs takes time.”

“Time,” Sirius murmurs.

The tap is dripping water into the bath. Drip, drip, drip, drip.

“But what if I don’t *have* time?” Sirius asks, finally. Mountainously.

Remus thinks long and hard about this one. Lets the air filter out and swirl back in. His lip quirks up, on one side.

“Steal it,” is what he settles for.

Sirius’ eyes glimmer with a beseeching pine. It’s encouraging, and pressing, and imperatively important, and Remus thinks he’s caught onto the allegorical tongue that they’re speaking in and finds that he wouldn’t mind if this day was repeated a couple hundred times until he was able to predict exactly what Sirius would do, every single action, every single movement. Not until he had him, but until he was given him. He’s interested. He’s hanging onto every word he’s saying like it’s a rope off the edge of a jagged, colosseum cliff.

Whew. Sirius in his hands is something that he did not see coming, and yet he’s falling and Remus is going to catch him. He’s going to catch him in his waiting palms.

“Hmm,” Sirius says, contemplatively. “Maybe you do give police statements every other week if you’re just *stealing time*, willy-nilly.”

Remus laughs.

“Your bath is done,” he says, leaning back on the radiator. “I think Dorcas and Marlene wanted to stay and watch a movie, so, don’t spend hours in here or Cas will eat all of the popcorn.”

Sirius takes a breath in, then smiles. “Got it.”

Remus nods. He exits, and closes the door behind him. Stands facing the hallway, and Fizzy is sitting at the end of the corridor.

“Come on, Fizz,” he mutters, clacking his tongue at her and pointing down the stairs. “We’ll see him in half a bloody hour.”

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Half a bloody hour passes, and Remus is in his room, sorting through his old DVDs when the door opens and Sirius walks in.

The first thing Remus notices is that his hair is slicked back. The second thing that Remus notices is that he’s wearing his hoodie.

“That’s my hoodie,” comes out of his mouth, more of shock than anything. Sirius’ mouth is already open to speak. He doesn’t know why he didn’t just let the man fucking talk.

“I know,” he says, apologetic, awkward, “but I brought– I brought joggers into the bathroom but I didn’t bring a top, and this was hanging on the door, and I didn’t exactly want to walk down the hallway half-naked incase Dorcas’ grandmother turned the corner and had a fucking fatal heart attack because my nipples were out, so I just came to... change–”

He moves so delicately and so daintily across the room, three light tip-toed steps on the cold wooden floor towards his luggage, and Remus doesn’t feel his lips move but he hears himself say, “Keep it on.”



Sirius looks at him. “What?”

Remus opens his mouth and then closes it. And then opens it again.

“Couples wear each other's clothes,” he says. Offers. “Like, it’s... a thing for people to steal each other’s hoodies. Right?”

Sirius blinks. “Yeah.”

“Realism,” Remus says, simply. He doesn’t know why this prospect - this arrangement - sounds so ridiculous now when this morning, just this morning, it sounded fine. But he *does* know that he likes the look of Sirius in his grey hoodie, and that he feels like, overall, it would be beneficial to multiple parties if he simply kept it on.

Sirius swallows, and then nods. “Er— okay. Alright. I’ll keep it on.”

Remus nods back.

“What are we watching?”

“Dorcas wants to watch *Elf*,” Remus murmurs, turning back to his DVD shelf. “It’s her favourite Christmas movie, and I know I have it here, but—”

“It’s there,” Sirius says. Remus turns to him, slowly, to see that he’s pointing at the shelving area underneath the end table.

And sure enough, there it is.

Sirius Black continues to surprise him.

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Three things happen during the rest of the night that sticks with Remus when he’s trying to sleep.

The first is during the movie.

They get into the living room, and Lyall Lupin is upstairs. Dorcas' parents and grandmother have left for the night - it's around 9pm - but the two girls are still here, along with Remus' parents. Hope is crocheting something on one sofa, space beside her. There's an armchair. Remus takes the armchair.

Except, Sirius goes to get a glass of water for both himself and Remus when he asks, and when he comes back in, Lyall Lupin has taken the last spot on the sofa.

This is incredibly unprecedented.

Remus can almost see the cogs begin to whirr in Sirius' brain. There's two sofas and an armchair. Hope and Lyall have claimed one, Marlene and Dorcas have claimed the other. Marlene has her feet in Dorcas' lap and is currently fiddling with the remote to try and get the blasted DVD player to work. Remus isn't sure why it's been left to her when she has been in the Lupin household for even shorter an amount than Sirius has, but regardless, she's setting it up. And Lyall Lupin has taken the last spot on the sofa, and Remus is in an armchair, and Sirius blinks.

Remus sees the decision being made even before he makes it. Sirius exhales, and it sort of deflates him - his shoulders sink, but he holds his chin higher to compensate - and they have a sort of silent conversation in the two seconds and three paces it takes for Sirius to cross the room, starting with something of an eye-widen from Remus that conveys "*Are you gonna—*" and a slight head shake from Sirius that encapsulates "*What the fuck else am I meant to do?*". It all cultivates with Sirius hesitating for a split second, putting the glasses on the side table, and then plonking himself down on Remus' lap; swinging his legs over the arm of the chair so he's facing sideways, arm around the back, around Remus' neck.

His arse is boney.

"*Christ, your arse is boney,*" Remus mutters as Sirius tries to get comfortable. Dorcas snickers. Sirius huffs.

"Shhh, we're watching a movie," he says, mockingly, and Remus rolls his eyes and shifts, slightly, to get Sirius in a place where he's comfortable, but

the guy won't stop moving. And his arse is *boney*.

Remus huffs about three minutes in and, pulling his arm out from where it's snaked behind Sirius' back on the opposing arm, grabs him by both of his hips and pulls him sideways onto his lap, fully, so he isn't half falling off the end of Remus' thigh but cushioned by both.

Sirius gasps when he does it. His head swivels around to Remus, but swivels back in equal timing - he looks stoically at the TV and snuggles into his new position, swinging one leg over the other from where they're hanging off the side of the chair.

It is marginally more comfortable. It's a lot more comfortable, actually.

And Sirius isn't a burden to hold. He's not too much of a weight, dainty little thing, and he shifts enough that Remus' thighs don't go entirely numb because by the time that they do he's swivelled around and put pressure on another side.

Trouble is, however, by about the midway point of the movie he shifts onto a place where no man should ever venture through two layers of clothing. Remus inhales sharply and has to press his lips together. Take a breath. Sirius' torso is sort of swivelled, more fully - his legs are almost falling off the end of the arm - and so Remus places his hands gently on his hips from behind and pulls him, slightly to the side, trying his utmost - *utmost* - best to avoid the area lest the unfortunate consequences say hello to Sirius as they're very much saying hello to Remus.

His hands linger on Sirius' hips, for a moment. It is quiet, and dark, the only light being a meagre lamp across the room and the electromagnetic blue haze of the television pixels, and Remus can't see Sirius' face when he does it but he can hear Sirius' sharp inhale much like his own and he squirms a lot more frequently after that event, which is unfortunate for Remus, who sort of can't focus anymore on the movie at all for the ringing in his ears and the very, very sudden realisation that he is a *man* and he is attracted to *other men* and he has an arguably attractive man *sitting on his lap* and regardless of any extraneous variables the body craves for what it craves

for, and the closeness. Oh, closeness. It's been a while. He's missed closeness.

So, maybe he's not sure why he does what he does next, or maybe he is. Maybe it's that craving, or maybe it's self-destruction, self-indulgence; maybe the consistent pine smell loafing through the cottage from the fire or the snow or the wine he drained on Saturday has finally gone to his head and made him go mad. Any of these are viable reasons for why he, near the end of the movie, upon his leg going numb, wraps his arms around Sirius' waist and pulls him into a different position - which he goes into willingly - and then leaves them there. A sort of back hug.

He pulls himself up from where he's gradually slouched over the course of the movie. His head is in line with the side of Sirius' shoulder from where he's sitting, and Remus leans forward, rests his chin on there so he's close enough to whisper, "Is this okay?"

Sirius inhales, not taking his eyes off the TV. "It's fine." And then, quietly, "It's realistic."

"Yeah."

Sirius nods. He's quiet and still for the remainder of the movie, aside from one point, where he shuffles back closer into Remus' arms, and another in which neither of them seem to be able to place where his hands are laid to rest gently over the top of Remus' on his hip, a deed in the dark revealed in the light when Hope turns the big lamp on and their corneas begin to burn.

Sirius stretches, and the consequences appear again. Remus shifts. He pulls his arms back into himself and Sirius is off his lap in a moment, kneeling down to scruff at Fizzy's face when Lyall opens the door and she comes bounding in, and Remus' legs are crossed. Marlene is sleepy and Dorcas picks her up bridal style and then hoists her over her shoulder, in which Marlene shrieks and bangs on her back and then plays dead, letting her arms fall like her limp, wavy blonde hair, raising her head only to wink at Remus through her mop before she drops dead again. She stays that way when Dorcas throws her back onto the vacant sofa, and only resuscitates when Dorcas begins tickling her, an event that has Fizzy running blindly in

circles and Poppy, lingering at the door, scampering away in horror, until Marlene makes a breathless time out sign with her hands and Dorcas pulls her into a hug, instead.

Sirius watches, smiling from the floor, Fizz in his arms. He locks eyes with Remus and then looks away, quickly.

Marlene suggests that the four of them go to the Christmas market in town tomorrow, which Remus thinks is a brilliant idea, and they prepare to depart bundled in scarves and coats and Remus offers to walk them despite the fact they're literally walking over the road because ice, wind, snow, dark.

Marlene gives Sirius a big hug and then a smack on the arse when she leaves. It is an interesting development for a nine hour friendship; Remus is quite certain even after their break-up, Marlene will all but continue her star-struck presence in his life. At least he's getting one good thing out of it, he supposes.

Dorcas corners him in the hallway at the bottom of the stairs after Marlene trudges up them, trailing a red scarf behind her, after proclaiming that she is going to projectile thrust herself into their bed and never leave. It's quiet, and gloomy, dim lit with only the hall light, a single lamp above them, and it's the first time they've spoken alone since the day began.

Remus expects to be grilled, and he is, but it's for all or the wrong reasons.

The first thing that comes out of Dorcas' mouth is, "You and Sirius aren't actually together, are you?"

He gapes.

"Are you fucking serious?" is what comes out of his, after a moment of gaping; it's all but a confession.

"No," she says. "And you're not, either, apparently."

He's in shock, to be honest. He feels like he's going to deflate into a puddle and get soaked up by the little cress seeds in the ground if all of this has

been for nought.

“Stupid joke,” Remus mutters. She ignores him.

“I like him,” she continues, which throws Remus for a loop. “He’s fun. He’s got life. Fire. You could use a bit of vitriol in your little water-logged village life.”

Remus blinks. “Okay, you’ve lost me.”

“You’re not together,” Dorcas says. And then she wiggles her eyebrows. “Yet.”

Remus groans fucking almighty.

“Good God,” he sighs, thumb and forefinger pressed to both temples. “You are a handful and a half, you know that?”

She shrugs. “I have double D’s.”

“*Dorcas*—”

She cackles at her own joke like she’s just received a standing ovation.

“—be serious with me, now,” Remus says, sort of desperately, “how did you know? Is it obvious?”

Dorcas shakes her head. “It’s really not. Honest. Not to anyone who didn’t spend five years sitting next to you in form making ogle eyes at Nathan Hodgkins. Or anyone who spent all five fucking years doing architecture listening to you in the next room with Ben—”

“Oi,” Remus interjects, hastily. No Ben. Ben was his university ex. University exes are off bounds.

“Uni exes are off bounds, sorry,” she says, putting her hands up in surrender. (Remus has forgotten how well he knows her. It is a blessing and a curse. Mainly a curse.) “But what I mean is I’ve seen you in love before. It’s not this.”

Remus frowns. “Then– what the hell did you mean by- by, *vitriol in my water-logged village*. What is this?”

Dorcas thins her lips and looks at him for a long moment, and then she decides on, “Potential.”

“Po-*whatnow*?”

“Look,” Dorcas says, “I’ve given you my explanation. Why is he here? What did you do?”

“Why do you assume I *did* anything?” Remus asks, but he hears the question as he says it and cringes. “Yeah. Okay. I did something.”

And so he tells her. He leaves out the pub quiz and the Christmas party and the Sirius Weekend™, not because they aren’t imperative to the story, but they aren’t imperative to her story. She doesn’t need to know.

Once she’s digested the information, she calls him an idiot.

“I know,” he says.

“A moron.”

“I know.”

“A full fledged village idiot.”

“Yeah.”

“If this were a village, you would be the idiot.”

“This *is* a village, and stop quoting *Nativity* to me.”

She laughs, that gorgeous thing, and leans against the radiator.

“I won’t say anything,” she says, shrugging. “Obviously.”

“Thank you.”

“You can date him for the weekend to please your Ma and then drive him back down to Devon and never speak again outside of asking for permission slips and printer paper.”

Remus squints at her.

“This feels like there will be an “or”,” he says. “I’m sensing an or.”

She takes a pause. For dramatic effect, of course.

“Or,” she says, revelling in the eye roll he gives her, “you can see.”

“See.”

“See what happens,” she finishes.

Remus stares at her. Takes a breath in, a breath out.

And then, “You know, Marlene didn’t like me on our first date. Always talks about how she almost sent a text letting me down gently, and then thought, *fuck it*. I’ll let her take me out to this bloody railway museum and we’ll see what happens.”

“You took her to a *railway museum* on a second date?”

“I’m a lesbian, Remus, I’m not tactical,” she drones. “Anyway, don’t hate, ‘cause she loved it. She judged me over my batwing top and my spoons order but she kept an open mind and then we had a *banging* time, talking about bloody *trains* of all things and she learned the most valuable life lesson one can learn at twenty-eight: you can’t judge the worth of someone based on what they order at Wetherspoons. You don’t get something reflective of their personality over a bowl of Halloumi fries and four Tanqueray’s. ”

She pushes herself off the radiator, and looks up at him, beseechingly. He blinks at her.

He’s so fucking confused.



“I’m so fucking confused,” he says, “Why are we talking about Halloumi fries?”

“I’ll let you get there,” Dorcas says, patting his arm. “You get there on your own time, love.”

“Get *where*?”

“Goodbyeee,” she chippers, opening the door and coercing him out of it. “I’ll see you tomorrow! Bright and early!”

“You are a menace.”

“Love you.”

“Scoundrel.”

She kisses him on the cheek. “Get home safe! Don’t slip!”

And the door is shut. In his face.

Event number two concluded. Event number three commence.

Remus goes in the shower, when he gets back. He lets the water run from his head down the tickly parts of his neck, down his back, muscles flexing as he stretches and reaches for the shampoo, for the soap. He thinks. He should have a lot of thoughts. He should have a lot of thoughts about Pembrokeshire, about home. Thoughts about how Poppy is currently sleeping on his pillow (he went in to nab some clothes. He and Sirius did not speak) and the fact that he’s going to have to haul her off to sleep. It’ll make her unhappy. She’ll be moody at him. He’ll find her something at the Christmas Market tomorrow, is what he thinks; about the town. About lunch with his mum and his fake-boyfriend. About the couple holding hands, clad with Primark bags, the scant shore just on their horizon, hand holding regardless of dead weight, hand in his. A smile and a laugh. Wet hair and a wicked gaze, and he thinks of potential, he thinks of potential. He does not want to think of potential. It’s very easy to stop thinking of potential when he starts thinking about the way that Sirius felt on his lap and the way that

he felt, wrapping his arms around his waist, soft body, a little thing in his grasp. A little thing with vitriolic power. His water-logged life. His water-logged ears, his water-logged eyes, hair pushed down and falling over it as he, inconstruably, takes himself in his hand for one reason and one reason only, potential, potential, potential.

What gets him is hair. The idea of what it would feel like between the crevices of his fingers. It is a shameful wank. He is a shameful man. He is red-flushed and it won't go away alongside his inherent embarrassment as he stands, braced on the sink, for five minutes, until he gives up and hopes that it's toned enough to seem like it's just warm, but it's useless, really, because he walks into the bedroom and Sirius has tied his mop of hair up in a topknot on his head, and there is a chunk that has fallen out to his left side and barely any to the right, and it looks ridiculous, and Remus is unbearably attracted to him.

*Hooooo*ly shit. This is unprecedented. This is *not* part of the fake-boyfriends-for-the-week game plan.

And it's a nightmare. He is ready, already, in his pyjamas, hair dry enough, everything in order, ready for him to clamber into the side of the bed that he is occupying. It's a nightmare because he doesn't understand when it happened. It's a nightmare because two weeks ago he didn't even *like* Sirius Black, and now he likes him... more than one ought to when in Pembrokeshire pretending to be boyfriends. Pretend. He can't shag a pretend partner. What the fuck would that make him?

*Human*, a small part of his mind echoes when he turns to look at Sirius, pouting slightly with concentration, scrolling on his phone.

His head turns to Remus, and he ceases all movement.

"What?" he asks, and Remus isn't sure of what. He's not— he's not sure.

Dorcas' words keep banging around in his head and he doesn't want them to mean anything, but they do. And warmth keeps simmering on the edge of his tongue and he doesn't want it to mean anything, but it does.

Warmth feels too pleasant for the touch and go amiability - *fake, fake, it's all fake, Remus, it's fake* - but cold feels like a backwards step onto black ice, and so Remus lets his brain speak for him.

His brain decides on, "I didn't know you spoke sign language."

Sirius opens his mouth, then closes it. Looks down at Remus like he's some sort of strange alien creature even though *he* is the one in *Remus'* bed. Even though he is the one barging his way into Remus' life. Making a mess and then driving through the snow back into the blizzard.

"Yeah," he says, nodding. "My brother was born Deaf. I've known it my whole life."

Remus takes a moment to process this, and then, predictably, "I didn't know you had a brother."

Sirius exhales sharply out of his nose. It could be a laugh or it could be annoyance. Remus is yet to know which he would like for it to be.

"You don't know a lot about me, apparently," he mutters, looking down. And then he freezes for a moment. As if he didn't intend on verbalising that particular sentiment and now the balance of the universe is at stake.

(Remus thinks that is a tad dramatic, but maybe he has no room to talk, considering the balance of his universe is at stake from a few strands of corkscrew curl hair.)

"No, I don't," Remus replies. It feels melancholic. The air is heated around them, and Poppy has made a home at the end of the bed, in the crevices between Remus' legs, and the clock is about to strike midnight and it feels like a moment behind a lock and key. An ancient door that wheezes dust when you lodge it open.

"Well, I do have a brother," he says. "Name's Regulus. Congenitally deaf. Little bloody genius. Just got his masters in Biology from Durham this past June; he's somewhere in Barcelona right now on business."

Remus doesn't exactly know what to say, so he just says, "Okay."

Sirius looks at him. He seems agitated. "Okay?"

Remus blinks. "Yeah. Okay. Thank you for telling me that."

Sirius looks at him for a moment, mouth slightly parted, and then laughs.

"You," he says. It's a bitter laugh, Remus thinks. "You're—"

Remus moves to sit up, slightly, on his elbow. "I'm what?"

"Mercurial," Sirius says, simply.

"In what sense?"

"The temperamental sense."

"Not what I mean."

"The *emotional* sense," Sirius says. Remus goes quiet. "I'm not sure if you're genuinely interested in my life or if I'm just a way to pass the time until the 27th comes and we can go home."

"I *am* interested," Remus says, quietly.

He is a small thing, with a small mind, and a small assurance. He doesn't know where the words are coming from until he says them, but once he does he realises that they cannot be truer. Is that not the whole reason Sirius Black is here, laying beside him? Giving himself a little piece of him to discover? Because Remus is interested in his workings, his life, his soul? Because Remus saw a glimpse of the character underneath the layers, underneath his shirt and underneath his skin, the blue flame scorching the insides of his mechanic beating chest, barred ribs; he is interested in what he has refused to see, isn't he?

The epistemological thirst for knowledge. Why he has centered on Sirius Black, he'll never know, but all he can see is wine stains when he closes his eyes and he wants to know what happens when you wash the shirt.

“Okay,” Sirius says, quietly.

It’s quiet, and Remus feels like he’s the next player in a game of chess that he’s never really played before.

“Why don’t we...” Remus says, quietly. He licks his lips and revels in Sirius watching him. Wonders if he feels it too. “Play a game.”

Sirius blinks. “A game.”

“Tomorrow,” he continues. “When we go to the Christmas market. Whenever you see anything that reminds you of— of your childhood, or a happy or significant time in your life, you have to tell me it.”

Sirius’ face softens. He purses his lips, pulling at the loose string at the corner of the duvet.

“And you, too?” he says, eventually.

“And me, too,” Remus nods. “We’ll see who can get the most.”

“That’ll be you,” Sirius says, “you grew up here. It’ll be unfair.”

“Well, it’s not a game to win or to lose,” Remus says, wrinkling his nose.

“Then what the hell is it for?”

He contemplates this.

“For you to know that I’ll be listening,” he replies, quietly. It feels like it echoes around the room and bounces back to them with the blink of an eye and the trip of a heartbeat.

Sirius gives him a smile. It’s small, but it’s real.

## V

“Fuck me,” is the first thing that Remus hears that next morning.

“Hmgh,” is what he says in reply.

“Fuck me, *look* at this,” breathes Sirius; or, the cloudy, sleep-spectacle version of Sirius standing at the window, hands braced on the windowsill. Eyes beseeching.

Remus groans again. It’s a minute, or a minute and a half of rubbing at his sleep slick eyes and stretching into place, bones clicking horrendously before he pulls himself out of bed, taking the knitted warm-toned afghan on the end of it with him and wrapping it over his shoulders as he slides in next to Sirius at the windowsill. And there is snow.

There was snow yesterday. This is *snow*.

It’s snowing so heavily that the skies are grey and he can barely see the house across the street in the smog. The snowflakes twirl, shimmer and pirouette around each other like its a tornado in Kansas, slamming against the window and trickling down, glistening pearls of water. The streets are lathered, the hedge weighed down. Sirius’ mouth is wide open. Remus, without looking, reaches up a hand and closes it.

“Will the markets be closed?” Sirius asks, and Remus simply shrugs.

It’s tenebrous and beautiful. Sirius flicks his black hair over his shoulders and breathes in, and when it fogs up the window upon his exhale, he draws a smiley face.

Remus can’t suppress the strange quirk of his lips, but hides it by turning and making his way downstairs.

Dorcas is already sitting at the kitchen table.

“Good morning, stragglers,” she announces from where she is sitting with Hope, hands around a steaming cup of hot chocolate. Her coat and her scarf are off but her hat is still on; Remus pulls it off by the bobble and whacks her round the face with it.

“Don’t be rude, Remus,” Hope scolds, but she gets up to make them drinks, anyway.

“Nice to know you’re a morning person,” Sirius says, sitting down, hugging himself with his bare arms. Remus’ eyes flicker to the clock. It’s 8am.

“No time like the present,” Dorcas replies. Sirius scoffs.

“You’d get along swimmingly with my friend James, you know,” he says, tapping his fingers on the table. “And by that I mean you’d hate him, because you’re the same person.”

Remus laughs. It’s true.

“There can only be one,” Sirius continues. “You should get in the ring. Fight to the death. Would make for bloody good entertainment.”

“Our own hunger games down in Devon,” Remus remarks, and Sirius smiles down to the table. Dorcas raises her eyebrows, amused.

“How did we get to talking about me becoming a *murderer* at 8am?” she asks.

“You might not be the murderer,” Sirius points out.

“Oh, no,” Dorcas says, pointedly. “I would.”

And that's that. Sirius nods. He’s fighting a smile and somehow it’s prettier than the smile itself.

“Anyway, I don’t know if the markets will be opening,” Dorcas says, “If they are it’ll be scarce and honestly, I don’t fancy going out in *that*.” She points a thumb to the window behind her. And then she smiles. “Luckily for you. Marlene came up with a fall-through plan.”

They both look at her warily. Her grin grows.

“Ice skating.”

“Oh, god,” Sirius murmurs.

“Absolutely not,” Remus says, firmly. “I have no balance. I will fall and die.”

“Come *on*,” Dorcas groans. “You never go with me.”

“For a *reason!*”

“I’m down,” Sirius says, and Remus stares what he hopes is daggers of betrayal and gets that stupid smile fight again; he’s wrangling it with two hands like a feral cat.

It makes him warm. Sirius seems cold. He has goosebumps.

“That’s three against four,” Dorcas says, looking pointedly at Remus. “It’s indoor, so we can do that, and then maybe by two or three the snow will have eased up and the markets will be perusable.”

“Lionel says that it’ll ease by midday,” Hope pipes in from where she’s putting two mugs into the microwave. Sirius frowns.

“Lionel...?”

“Sexy weather-man,” both Remus and Dorcas say, and he nods resolutely.

“Of course. Who else.”

Remus takes a deep, trying breath.

“Okay,” he says, acquiescing. “Okay. Maybe I’ll be better than I was at eighteen.”

“That’s the spirit!”



“But I will be sticking to the railings.”

“...Less of the spirit, but you’re holding on!”

“And I will not enjoy myself.”

Dorcas blows a raspberry and makes an extravagant thumbs down.

“Yes you will,” she says. “We’ll make it fun, won’t we, Sirius?”

Remus looks over to Sirius, who is looking at him. He has his arms wrapped around himself and he’s rubbing, slightly. Before he can say anything Remus sighs, pulls the afghan from around his shoulders and deposits them around Sirius’. He leans into the warmth with a happy exhale and cocoons himself like a baby.

“Yeah,” he says, strained as he shuffles slightly to squeeze the blanket around his whole body. It’s bigger on him; he looks like he’s drowning in it.

He looks at Remus, and he smiles. “We’ll make it fun.”

\*\*\*

It is not fun. Ice skating is not fun.

Marlene, Remus finds out all too late (*all too late* being a conversation in the cloakroom, strapping the rental skates on while the ice resurfer does his job) is some sort of ice skating prodigy - she figure skates, as a *hobby*, at the Ice Arena in Cardiff. Dorcas goes to watch her, sometimes. Nobody thought to mention this, but, alas, she’s brilliant.

Dorcas isn’t much better than Remus, to be honest, but she’s confident. The doors open and they get onto the rink on their slot and it’s not huge, not like an ice hockey rink or a ballroom, but it’s big enough. There are about fifty, sixty, maybe, people on the rink - men and women and children on the little penguin helpers that Remus thinks are absolutely adorable. There’s a christmas tree in the corner. The lights twinkle red and golden, underneath a disco ball that glows luminescent like bending light through a prism, prismacolors, a rainbow. It’s pretty and it’s fun and Dorcas is confident,

skating forwards, laughing as Marlene skates backwards and twirls and reaches her hands out for Dorcas to reach her, only to skate back just as she's about to get there, out of time. Dorcas gets bumped into by a kid no older than fourteen and falls on her ass. It's hilarious, but Remus would rather not, so he stays by the edge of the rink, holding onto the barricades and sort of shuffling his way along. It's fun to watch. It's enjoyable. Totally.

Sirius is good.

He's not a *skater*, not like Marlene, but it's evident that he's done this before. He sort of skates in circles around the both of them, comes up behind Marlene and scares her. She does a twirl and he attempts to recreate it and falls on his own ass, his first of the night, to which Dorcas proclaims that finally, she's not the only one, and the girls both help him up. He's shivering and his nose is red, his face is red. He gets red a lot. Remus has noticed this. It's a rosy flush in the winter chill, a warning sign in the pale white snow, but he's laughing. They try to skate just the three of them, Sirius' arms around both of their necks (he's smaller than Dorcas, taller than Marlene but not by much) and all three of them fall. There's a barricade that Marlene manages to grab onto to save herself when Sirius topples them over, her feet flailing and her arms grasping for dear life, but Dorcas and Sirius go over on top of each other. She ends up with her face to ice and he sits back, cold palms to the cold floor while other skates tenderly avoid them in the hopes that they will not slice their fingers off - they're in hysterics. They get up. They go on. Remus is cold but he is warm, watching them.

Marlene takes Dorcas' hand and tells her that she'll go steady, and Dorcas does not believe her, but regardless, they skate off. Sirius almost bumps into a little kid on a penguin and steadies her with a gasp, laughing with her parents who come skating up and proclaiming that she's *always on the run, little menace*, and Sirius says he knows a child like that, too. So does Remus.

Sirius turns to him.

It's only three slow paces over to him, a fluid, suave sort of slotting in beside Remus at the barricades before the cold and the damp of Sirius is

hitting him like a wave of fresh air. He sniffs and smiles, gently, holding out his hand.

Remus takes one look at it and says, quite resolutely, “No.”

“Come on,” Sirius says, and he has been spending too much time with Dorcas, he has. “Come on, just once. You haven’t even left the sides. You might be really good at it.”

“No.”

“We said we’d make it fun, so you have to let us make it fun. Come on. Come on.”

“No.”

“Remus,” he’s saying, now, and it’s irritating and also hilarious, reminiscent of the time in his classroom trying to find the damn hole puncher, a hole puncher— a *hole puncher* brought him here. Gripping the barricades of an ice skating rink for dear life. Looking down the hand of a smiling Sirius Black of all fucking people, making it fun, making his life fun. His lip has healed well but if Remus looks closely he can still see the bruise. His lips aren’t chapped in the cold. They’re soft. He must have a lip balm, must have put it on before they went out. Of course he did. Of course.

“Remus. Remus. Remus. Remus.”

“Oh, dear God,” Remus says, “you’re not going to shut up, are you?”

“Nope.”

“Do you *ever*?”

“Nope.”

Remus stares, and Sirius grins. It’s a cheesing plea. He’s still firm.

Sirius’ face changes, and he slumps back. He slides in next to Remus properly and grips onto the barricade like he has been, watching the masses

skate. Dorcas and Marlene are at the other side of the rink. Marlene is darting in and out of people like a needle and thread.

“I used to skate every year,” Sirius says, suddenly. Remus blinks.

“Hm?”

“It’s not the market, but we can start the game now, if you’d like,” he says. “My uncle, Alphard, he lived up in York after he fled Devon. They have a sort of miniature Winter Wonderland thing there, big ice rink that they open every December with a Christmas tree at the centre around a barricade and it’s always gorgeously decorated and lit up, you know,” pointing at the one in the corner, “like that, but bigger.”

He turns to Remus, perhaps to make sure that he’s listening. He is.

“Anyway, we got into a tradition when we were teenagers to go up there for an extended weekend late December after school finished; me, my brother and my cousin Andromeda. Fooled my mother into thinking we were going up there for advanced piano lessons, but instead we’d have a big fun weekend. He’d take us to the outlets and shopping malls and out sledding if it snowed and we’d go ice skating on one that little rink. It was always the highlight of my year.”

Remus blinks. He nods, and adjusts his grip on the barricade so that he can face Sirius. “When did it stop?”

Sirius inhales sharply, through his teeth. “When my mum found out what we were doing,” he says, with a sad little chuckle. “Which coincided with Andy getting disowned for getting pregnant out of wedlock, me going to uni and my brother getting shipped off to boarding school for his A-Levels, out of spite, probably.”

And, whew, Remus could say a lot about that, but their game was supposed to be happy or significant memories, so he simply doubles back and says, “So, you play piano?”

Sirius seems to deflate. Tension bleeds out of his shoulders like a crushed garlic clove.

“Yeah,” he says, nodding. “Grade 8.”

“*Jesus.*”

Sirius shrugs. “You could call me that.”

Remus snorts, at this, turning his head away to hide the amusement that such a stupid joke evoked, and Sirius laughs. He pushes himself off the barricade and does a little, unsteady twirl. Remus sighs. Heavily.

“Come on, then,” he says, holding out a hand; Sirius blinks at it. “You’re gonna have to hold me up. I hate this. I hate this so much.”

Sirius grins, bodily. It’s the brightest thing Remus has ever seen.

And it takes a while before he’s actually comfortable. Glued to Sirius’ arm, linked together. They skate around the sides of the rink, not holding onto the barricade but knowing that it’s there. They almost fall once and Sirius saves Remus, implicating himself in the process, which is marginally sweet, he supposes. Remus’ legs hurt but it’s not as bad as he thought it would be. The pain in his toes is manageable and it doesn’t stop him. Not much does.

They skate around the centre and pass Dorcas, who has definitely fallen over another few times. The two girls have their arms around each other, skating in time, and Dorcas gasps and Marlene hollers across the rink at him in support, letting go of Dorcas to do a little celebratory dance and a twirl. He sends her back a smile and a wary thumbs up. They’ve only known her a day, but Remus is unspeakably fond of her.

They begin to get closer to the middle of the rink. Sirius begins to let him go.

“Oh, no,” Remus says, trying to clutch onto him harder. “No. Nope.”

“You’re better than you think,” he says through a laugh, cold air corporealising in front of them even despite being inside.

“No I’m not.”

“Yes you are,” Sirius says, and then sort of pushes him - not hard at all, just to loosen the grip so that they’re a forearm’s length apart. His hands are now on Remus’ shoulders and Remus is scowling at him.

He laughs.

“Try skating yourself,” Sirius says. “A pace or two. There’s barely anyone around.”

He’s right, there aren’t that many, it’s coming to the end of their slot and some people with kids and such have left early. Remus still scowls.

And then Sirius actually pouts. He has the audacity to *pout*.

“Do it for me,” he says, still pouting, “because I miss my uncle and my brother and my cousin and skating with them.”

Remus gapes. “Are you *guilt tripping* me?”

“If the shoe fits,” Sirius says, face flickering back to a rest. He laughs. Bites his bottom lip in it, and Remus is going to do what he says. For some reason, it’s inevitable.

And so he lets go. Very, very slowly. Sirius lets go of him, hands out, cautious - he didn’t wear gloves, the idiot, his fingers are freezing and raw and antarctic, but they’re stable. Remus stands, steady, for a moment, and then moves like Sirius taught him. Slides across the ice, one foot forward, out, north-east; the other foot forward, out, south-west. And he skates.

Sirius, following him, a substantial distance to the side, grins widely. Remus looks at him, and he bites his lip and gives him a thumbs up.

“Keep going!” he yells, and so Remus does.

It’s not perfect. He is not good. He’s not particularly confident, either, and so he almost squeals (embarrassing, he knows) when a substantially better skater shoots past him like an asteroid and almost throws him off, but he

doesn't. And Sirius comes back to join him. They skate beside each other, sort of fluid, sort of clunky, and it's actually enjoyable. They do a whole turn. Remus is smiling. He's having fun. What a concept.

"Hold my hand," Sirius says, once they get to roundabout where they started; Remus looks at him.

"Why?" he says, but he takes it.

Sirius makes a face as if it should be obvious. "So that we can go faster without you falling over."

*"Faster—?"*

Sirius cackles as he pulls him forward, and Remus feels like he's flying.

They're flying. The two of them, somewhere unseen. He doesn't know where. He doesn't think Sirius does either. But wherever they're going, it's behind a rainbow; behind a mountainous cliffside, jagged and white, cliffs of Dover. Up and over and around and through. They're going somewhere where it is cold, but Remus' afghan will warm Sirius up. Remus' hand will warm Sirius up. They're flying, and they're flying.

They're falling.

A child comes out of bloody fucking nowhere - nine or ten years old, probably, on one of those stupid penguins - and Sirius yelps. He skirts to the side, except, of course, Remus is on his side, and so they sort of topple. Remus slips backwards on his skates but Sirius grabs onto his jacket and pulls, and so he falls straight back and Remus falls forward, onto his knees, hand sending a horrible twinge of pain up his arm, his legs aching as he braces himself on the floor. Sirius is flat on his back. He's on top of him.

His mouth is open, wide, in shock. His hair is sticky and splayed over the crushed ice, and he and Remus lock eyes at the same time. Their faces are barely a few inches apart, and their breath is corporeal, mixed with the others.

They lock eyes. And they burst into laughter.

Remus falls onto his elbows and lets his head fall onto Sirius' chest, which is heaving. It's slightly ridiculous. It's very ridiculous, and Sirius is taking deep, audible breaths, throat vibrating, chuckles getting in the way.

"Oh, God, I think I'm winded," he says, gasping for air, and Remus pulls back. They're still laughing, but he pushes himself up slowly so he's sitting back on his heels and helps Sirius sit up, and then get up, and then they're skating slowly back to the barricade for Sirius to catch his breath.

"Fuck me," he says, banging on his chest. He's breathing heavily. He's still laughing. Remus is still laughing.

"Sorry," he murmurs.

"What are you sorry for?" Sirius asks, turning his head to cough into his elbow. "It was that bloody kid."

Remus shrugs. "Be nice to the kid."

"I'm only legally obligated to be nice to eleven to eighteen year olds. Any younger I *will* bully, and I will bully well."

Remus bursts out laughing at this, and the announcement is made to retreat to the insides, and he links his arm into Sirius'. Doesn't even think about it. Sirius settles into his side as comfortably as the storm welcomes the rain, and they hobble along the ice until they get to the cloakroom.

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The snow eases up around 3pm, and Dorcas is ecstatic.

The pair of them walk into the cottage and Dorcas bangs the door to the kitchen open so aggressively that Sirius, walking across the room to retrieve a mug, jumps so hard he stumbles and falls *over* Fizzy, flat on his ass.

Marlene snorts, and says, "Idiot."



Sirius looks up at her, indignation on his face, and replies, “Fuck you.”

Marlene signs something.

Dorcas tiptoes over to Remus and murmurs, “She just called him an idiot again,” and Remus, watching from the sidelines as Sirius projects himself across the room and tickles Marlene within an inch of her life, nods and says, “Sounds about right.”

Hope sort of implicates herself in their plans when she comes home from walking Carol’s poodles absolutely beside herself after realising she’s forgot to buy Carol’s husband something for Christmas, which, in all fairness, is not that big of a deal considering she has met Carol’s husband an approximate two times, but regardless she offers them all a lift in Lyall’s snow-scraped truck and so they take it.

Remus sits in the front, Dorcas, Marlene and Sirius in the back. He has an almost perfect view of Sirius in the rearview mirror. He’s still enthralled by their little town. They drive a different way, down winding roads and up and down a few rollercoaster hills to get to the free parking, and he watches out the window, eyes beseeching and admiring, breath fogging up the glass. Remus learns the sign for *dog* because he taps Marlene aggressively and signs it every time he sees one, refusing to take his eyes off of it. He’s something else. He’s really, really something else.

The Christmas market is set up in the biggest square in town. It’s surrounded by a couple family-owned businesses, a bakery (croissants are not far and few between) and a few charity shops. By 4pm it’s starting to get dark and it’s starting to get late, and, even though they’ll get caught up in the hubbub of the 5pm closing time when all of the people file out of the shops to simply continue shopping until the market closes at 8, Hope insists that they go on a little shopping binge until they’re physically kicked out.

The charity shops are fun. Remus finds an old edition of *Northanger Abbey* which he shows Marlene, who tells him that she owns an early edition of *Emma*, 1905, which he thinks is absolutely the coolest fucking thing ever and she spends five minutes scrolling through her phone to try and find pictures (getting marginally distracted in the meantime by pictures of her

ginger cat, Hobnob, which Remus does not complain about in the slightest). Dorcas finds a pair of low-rise bell bottom jeans that she buys not for herself but for Sirius, who refuses to take them until he finds and buys something for her - which ends up being a sort of cowboy-like mustard yellow shirt with tassels. A few of the buttons are missing and it really is a hideous shade of yellow but Dorcas falls in love with it immediately. Hope finds a snowglobe and a pair of tacky blue beaded plastic earrings. She also finds a credit card holder and a Venom figurine that she buys for the little boy next door with the Spider-Man bedsheets.

After their brief forage into the bakery which results in cinnamon rolls all around, Marlene pulls them into a vintage store, in which she buys a brown baker boy hat and immediately puts it on, professing for everyone within a five mile radius to hear that she is obsessed with it. There are changing rooms and Dorcas tries on a pair of jeans that are a no and a purple polo collared top that is a yes, and while Hope digs through the box of turtlenecks Sirius tries on a crop top, and when he comes out Remus' mouth is dry. It is the sahara desert.

It's sage green, which Remus already loves; it goes gorgeously with his eyes and he's pinned his hair up at the back of his head with the black bobble that lives on his wrist and so his whole neckline is on display, collarbones peeking out, and he looks fantastic. Remus is the only one paying attention - Marlene was supposed to be Judge Numero Dos but she got distracted by a pole of scarves - and so Sirius comes out, does a little twirl. He's wearing black jeans and scuffed docs and he should not look this good, and yet. And yet.

"What do you think?" he asks, a bit consciously. He scratches the back of his neck. "Am I too old for this now? Are my slag days over?"

Remus could choke on his tongue.

"You're—" he says, licking his lips furiously. No, he needs water. He needs the whole North Sea. He'd soak up the French Riviera like a sponge. "It looks good. Really good, on you, nice with your— eyes."

It's true, but he didn't have to fucking say it.

“With my eyes?” Sirius says, innocently. He turns back to the open changing room, presumably looking at the organ in question.

“Yeah,” Remus says, toying with an item of clothing on the rack beside him. “Looks good in general, though. If you had brown eyes, it’d still look good. It doesn’t look good because of your eyes, just a highlighting feature that I think makes it look—” he falters, “better.”

Sirius turns to him. He bites down on his bottom lip and his eyebrows are raised.

“You have brown eyes,” he says, and yes, wow, that is an observation, “do you want to try it on?”

“Oh, no,” Remus says. “*Nooo*, no, not my thing. It’ll be too small for me, anyway. It seems to be yours, though. Your thing, I mean.”

Sirius hums, turning and looking back in the mirror that Remus can’t see. He curves his body, swivels his torso. His arse is on free display, and Remus is *only human*.

“Well,” he says, briskly, “that was a confidence booster.” He turns to Remus, and smiles, actually. “Thank you for that. I think I’ll get it.”

“You should,” Remus says, before realising that there’s no point in trying to egg him on since he’s getting it, so he amends, “I’m glad, I mean,” which sounds ridiculous and stupid and like the whole world hinges on Sirius Black getting this crop top, which it absolutely does *not*, and so he splutters and finishes with, “I– cool,” which is *nonchalant* and *light* and *breezy* and *definitely* not affected in any way shape or form.

Sirius smiles and walks back into the changing room, whipping the curtains closed behind him. Good job, Remus. Good job.

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The market is flouncing, and it is beautiful.

In the dark of (a *whoppingly* late) 5:30pm, the little huts shine brighter than a billion stars. They're wooden, like little houses, lining a walkway up and down. There aren't too many, not like it would be in a bigger city like Cardiff, but there are enough to get lost in them.

They hold hands again, Sirius and Remus - it's unspoken, this time, Remus just reaches out when the crowds get thick and Sirius takes it - and Remus sort of leads them through, one hand in Sirius', one on his cane, Dorcas and Marlene to his left arm in arm taking in the sights. There are overhead twinkling Christmas decorations and holly wrapped around the roofs of the little huts. There's the smell of cinnamon, and mulled wine, and meat, hot dogs and greasy burgers wafting from a truck or two slotted carefully into the array of little stalls. There is a child being swung between the arms of her two parents and a baby crying in a carrier while his father tries to feed him a little bit of his gingerbread man. There are teenagers, arm in arm, taking up the entire length of the narrow space and doing gymnastics to try and let people pass. There is the elderly, a grandmother in a Santa hat, a young girl in a princess Elsa dress, complete with wig, clutching onto a cushion that reads "*Baby, it's cold outside*". It's homely and it's marvellous, all of it.

They peruse, in and out, but their game begins at the candle stall.

"This looks just like the candle that Beatrice used to have," Sirius murmurs, picking up a tall orange candle and smelling it. "Oh, wow, smells it, too."

He holds it gently under Remus' nose and he gets a whiff of oranges, cinnamon and spice.

"Who's Beatrice?"

"My uni housemate," he says, looking at the little price tag on the back of the candle. "She used to have this orange candle that she'd burn when she was stressed. The scent was all-encompassing but because it was so nice we got used to it, and eventually liked it so much that she brought it out and it became, like, the communal stress candle in the lounge."

"That sounds nice," Remus says.

“It was,” Sirius affirms. “You know when you smell something and it just sends you right back into the loveliest memories? Like, it was a stress candle, but none of us associated it with stress. It bled all of the stress out. It’s just happy memories, now.”

Remus looks at him. Watches him smell the candle once more, and smile to himself. Sigh, with something that seems like tranquility.

He buys the candle, and nudges Remus on the way over to the next stall. They’re arm in arm, now. Remus doesn’t know where Dorcas, Marlene or his mum have gone - he thinks Dorcas might have got distracted by the Udon noodle stall.

“That’s two for me and none for you,” Sirius murmurs. Remus laughs, despite himself.

“I told you it wasn’t a game to win or lose.”

“I’m a competitive bitch,” Sirius says, deadpan, “every game is a game to win or lose.”

Remus looks at him, sighs, rolls his eyes, but accepts this.

The next stall is a family-owned satchel/bag making company. The woman at the stall can’t be older than fifty. Her hair is dyed bright red and she has a lip piercing, and she’s so jovial that Remus and Sirius talk to her for at least ten minutes before even beginning to peruse her stuff.

“You know what this reminds me of?” Remus asks when he gets to the satchels and finds one, bright red. Sirius perks up immediately. His eyes are bright. Happy, perhaps.

“What?”

“My dad,” Remus says. Traces the stitching of the bag, the flap of opening. “He used to have an office job, did you know?”

“Office job?” Sirius asks, aghast; understandable, really, considering the fact that Lyall Lupin is the most outdoorsy person you could ever meet, and

imagining him in an office job is criminal.

“Yeah,” Remus says, “when I was a kid. Real serious stuff, for a property company, I think. He used to have a backpack just like this one, bright red, and he’d take it to work every day. Mam thought he was mad, stuck out like a sore thumb, but really he was just miserable in such a monotonal job. Wanted to add a bit of colour to it.”

Sirius hums, thoughtful. He takes a step forward and thumbs the strap of the bag.

“I can see his influence on you,” he says, after a moment, and Remus raises an eyebrow. “You wear that one cashmere purple-blue cardigan every other day at school when everyone else is wearing suits and bow-ties.”

Remus thins his lips and then he laughs, heartily, and Sirius grins too. Twirls the rack around to have a look at the other colours of the bags; purple, green, royal blue.

“You both want to stand out while simultaneously not wanting to stand out at all,” Sirius says, and he’s hit the nail in the head, really. The conscious, strenuous fickle need Remus has to be himself and be no one at the same time.

Remus hums.

“You’re not like that,” he puts forth, “and you don’t wear suits and bow ties, either.”

Sirius takes a breath, and lets the flap of the purple satchel he’s been examining fall.

“My thirst for eccentricity comes from a different place,” he says, slowly. “A maternal place, if you will.”

“Ah,” Remus says, putting two and two together. “Rebellious child.”

“Sheltered child,” Sirius says. “Controlled child.” And then, quieter, “Brave child.”

Remus looks at him. His hair is falling over his eyes. A carnal part of him that controls the movement of his hands reaches out and tucks a strand behind his ears. Sirius looks up, quickly. Imploringly.

“I don’t doubt that for a second,” Remus says, and Sirius smiles. Remus can’t tell if it’s the cold or if he’s blushing. He knows which one he would prefer, even if they both have the same glorious outcome.

Remus ends up buying a small little purse from the satchel woman. He’ll probably throw it in there as a Christmas present to his Mam. The kind, red-haired woman smiles so brightly he thinks it’s all worth it.

“Is that two: one, then?” Remus asks as Sirius reaches out to grab his hand through the bustle of the crowd.

“No,” Sirius says, “It’s three: one. I just gave you one, too.”

Remus squints. “Unfair.”

“Is not.”

“Is too. You get half a point.”

Sirius rolls his eyes, but he’s smiling. “Fine. I’ll take that.”

Remus smiles and hikes him closer as a family comes through.

They walk past a stall or two, perusing gently. They walk past a little stall with prints and signs, sort of like the *Live Laugh Love*-esque prints that a suburban mother would put up on a cream accent wall in the lounge. There’s a duck in a Santa hat in a frame, cracking (quite literally - hatching) a joke; there’s one that says, in intricate cursive, “*More Wine, Less Whine*” that Sirius laughs at, and then there’s a print hanging in a frame above the women, her hair in plaits, talking avidly to a customer. It’s a cartoon. Two typical golden five-point stars, with eyes and little stick legs and a smile. One is bigger than the other, and they’re talking to each other. The joke is something to do with Starbucks.

Sirius turns to him.

“You know what *that* reminds me of?” he asks, smirk on his face, and Remus takes a breath in.

“Your brother?” he answers. Sirius physically adjusts his stance to turn to look at him, loosening his hand but not dropping it. He looks genuinely surprised that Remus got it.

“Yeah,” he says, gently, and then he looks back at the stupid cartoon and chuckles, seemingly not of his own accord. “I’m gonna send him that, wait—”

Remus stands and waits as Sirius drops his hand to pull his phone out and snap a quick zoomed in picture of the print. Remus thins his lips and exhales an icy breath.

“Your parents liked the star names, then?” he asks. Sirius nods, typing out a text.

“Unfortunately,” he says, locking his phone, text sent. “We got bullied for dear life, but at least I have,” he flourishes towards the stupid cartoon, “this to attach my namesake to. How bloody lovely.”

He takes Remus’ arm once more, but there’s a bit of a hold up in the middle of the street due to a twin buggy, so they trail along at a glacial pace.

Sirius hums, and then he says; “Does that count as a happy memory exchange, or do I have to attach more to it?”

Remus shrugs. “If there’s anything perhaps a bit more cheery than bullying that you can attach to your starriness, go ahead.”

Sirius bites his lip in thought. The woman with the buggy moves, but Sirius and Remus don’t; he pulls him by the arm and Remus almost trips over his own walking stick as he gets pulled into a secluded corner in between stalls.

Before Remus can say anything (protest, probably), Sirius is speaking.

“Have you seen Marlene do this?” he asks, and then he signs something. He puts his palm flat horizontally and pulls it up, from his torso to his face, and



then pulls his fingers into his palm and flicks them out into a splay, like a star.

Remus has seen it. He nods.

“It’s my name sign,” he says. And then he repeats it, and adds the word to each action, “Big,” as he pulls his hand up, “Star,” as it flickers.

Remus’ mouth falls open.

“And your brother’s is—”

Sirius signs what is very obviously *Little Star*.

“My brother has been called that for as long as I can remember,” Sirius says, leaning against the wall. He speaks about his brother with a small smile on his face. As if love is all he holds and all he could ever. “Given to him as a baby for... well. Obvious reasons. But he was the one who came up with mine to match. He got the idea one day at primary school. I think I was eight. And I suppose it makes sense; it just... stuck.” He smiles to the floor. “So when I sent him that print—”

“The joke had layers,” Remus finishes, and Sirius grins.

“Many layers,” he murmurs, nodding. “So... there. That’s a happy, significant thing in my life.” He pauses, and then, “Three and a half to one, now.”

Remus scoffs out, “You and your bloody competitiveness,” but he offers his arm and Sirius takes it.

The fairy lights and golden streetlamps bathe them again as they walk along the cobbles, back and parallel to all of the stalls, and he has a slight smile on his face. He’s noticed that most of the memories that Sirius has shared have been outside of his childhood. Adjacent or excluded. That the strains of happiness were a part of him entirely locked up, to preserve in their scarcity.

For some reason, that makes this one feel a bit more sacred.

They switch across sides and end up at a quaint little alcohol stall. All of the drinks are packaged in gorgeous little glass bottles and labelled in brown paper with a little ribbon around them. The stall is lined with tinsel.

Remus drops Sirius' hand and carefully picks up a particularly familiar bottle of flavoured cider.

"First thing I ever got drunk off of," Remus says, brandishing it. "Granted, the cider I had was much more shitty than this, but it was stolen cider, at fourteen in a car park with Dorcas and a few of our other friends. It tasted like someone's bumhole. Maybe this will be vindication."

Sirius narrows his eyes. Remus can see that he sees it as a challenge, and so he walks around the little hut until he finds what he wants.

"Winter ale," he says, finally, turning around, brandishing a dark brown bottle with a little blue label. "First thing *I* got drunk off of. 'Twas a Black family ball, I was thirteen and self-destructive, they left the alcohol out. Trippiest night of my life. Andromeda had to carry me up to bed, and then I spent at least an hour drunk babbling to her about life until she crawled in there with me to make me go to sleep. She had to sneak out and leg it back to her own room before Mother noticed in the morning, and I had the worst hangover and resolved to never drink again." He puts the ale back. "Spoiler alert: that was a lie."

"I can see that," Remus laughs, thinking about little thirteen year old drunken Sirius Black and older twenty-nine year old drunken Sirius Black, the way his hair fluttered on that balcony, the way white wine lined his lips like an oath.

Remus buys the ale for him. Says he's never tried it and wants to know how little thirteen year old Sirius was feeling, and it's a lie, but it makes him smile.

They go over to the mulled wine stall, next. It's fitting. Remus tells him an anecdote about his Dad spilling mulled wine all down his new puffer coat when he was about 21, and it makes Sirius laugh heartily and almost bloody spill it down himself.

“Oh, wow, look at this jewellery stall,” Sirius says, looping his free arm through Remus’ wine arm without even seeming to think about it. They pad over to the stall and, when the masses dissipate, find Marlene and Dorcas there, too.

“Oh, shit!” Dorcas says, turning. “Hello, strangers. Did you get lost?”

“Yeah,” Remus says, “and somehow I ended up with some wine, some ale, a hideous purse and an even more hideous person attached to my hip—”

“Oh, you dickhead,” Sirius says, laughing and shoving him gently enough so that his wine doesn’t spill, but hard enough to protest. Remus grins at him.

Dorcas shows them a gorgeous carved shell necklace that she’s been eyeing up, and Remus and Sirius’ affirmations that it’s pretty are the thing that tips her over the edge to get it. Sirius is enthralled by the jewellery - it’s a tad expensive but so gorgeous, stone and metal and opal and topaz. Remus inquires to his mother’s whereabouts and is told that she’s across from them, looking at an art print stall, and Sirius is very interested in this; he detaches himself from Remus to go join her. He watches as Sirius walks up behind her and links his arm in with hers, happily surprising her. She grins warmly at him and they immediately begin to converse about something that Remus cannot hear. He can’t believe how well he fits.

He turns back to the jewellery stall. Dorcas is holding up two necklaces, now, showing them to her girlfriend - holding them up to her neck and asking for her to pick. Marlene picks the left one. Remus’ eyes are pulled across to the big ring box, which is where he sees it.

There’s a ring. It’s heavy-set and carved extraordinarily. A silver band, and on the front are two stars. One is bigger than the other, but they both glimmer. Electromagnetic against the twinkling lights, red against the tinsel and green against the holly. A big star and a small star.

And, of course, his mind goes straight back, back to that print, and then to Sirius, and then— then it goes somewhere further.

For he realises, all of a sudden, that Christmas is in three days and they haven't gotten each other presents. Or, at least, he hasn't gotten Sirius a present. Won't that be obvious? That will be incredibly obvious. What kind of person doesn't buy a present for their significant other? They'll figure it out then and there, if he doesn't get something for him, and he thinks— he thinks—

Of Regulus. Little brother. Little star. Little light in Leo. And Sirius. Big brother. The brightest star in the sky. Big and overbearing and powerful and warm and brave.

He doesn't know too much about them. All he knows is sacred wine spills and cradled fond sentiments needle-picked out of a black hole, but he knows that Sirius loves his brother, over everything, *everything* else, and so he thinks; it'll do.

He buys the ring and stuffs it in his pocket before his sleeve is tugged at by Sirius, who has seen a print that looks significantly like the art piece that Lily got for him the first Christmas that he knew her; the art piece that resonates so well with his soul, the art piece that made him realise for the first time that he was comfortable in their little city in Devon. Of how much she meant to him. They have a short little bonding moment about their adoration for Lily, and Remus thinks that he should really give her a call.

(He also finds out that Sirius did History with Art for his undergrad. And that he took a summer art history course in London a few years ago. And he discovers that he finds it incredibly enthralling to listen to talk about Art. Or maybe he finds it enthralling to listen to Sirius talk about Art. Maybe.)

The Christmas market continues this way, in that they go stall by stall, and they recount. They delve into the crevices of their cobwebbed brains and unearth things that are fundamental to their ever-intertwining psyches. Unearth things that are brushed off of the surface like dust trails, things that endear and intertwine them like their hands, held, with Hope and without. Remus has so much fun and he laughs so hard at Sirius' embarrassing memories that he feels like he's going to puncture a lung. Sirius tells him about his aversion to Red Leicester cheese due to a, quite frankly, hilarious cheeseboard incident when he was 22, and Remus tells him about when

Fizzy stole his entire cheese toastie right out of his hands. Sirius finds a ceramic bowl that looks like the one that he catharsis smashed when he finished his A-Levels. Remus finds a throw pillow that looks like the one he almost fell asleep on in Ikea one time with Lily. Sirius tells him about the pack of jellybeans that he used to steal periodically from the newsagents down the road in his rebellious days, and Remus tells him about the time that he stole a meal deal from Tesco and cried about it afterwards. Things like this. This and this. They go on, like a wave. They orbit each other and it's reminder after reminder, brainwave after brainwave.

They walk to the car, arm in arm in arm in arm. The four of them, Dorcas, Marlene, Sirius, Remus, who has his arm around his mother at the end. They side step together through the crunchy, un-trodden on snow down the back road. Their pockets are full with Christmas and their hearts are bursting with spice. Remus can taste snow on his lips and mulled wine at the back of his throat.

Under a lit up archway leads them through to a different street of the town, lined with cottage-looking shops, a convenience store and a tea room, a donut shop on the corner and a perfume shop that seems to just be closing, wafting fragrances through the air. The corporeal thickness of their breath is blown away by music, singing; there is a band, busking on the side of the road. They've pulled together quite a storm of Christmas shopping families and drunk girls from the pub down the road in clothes entirely unsuitable for the cold weather, and they're singing *Last Christmas* when they approach, but the song ends and they play the opening notes of *Fairytale of New York*, and there's an array of gasps, from them and from now.

"Oh, we *have* to stay," Sirius says; pleads. "*Please*. This is the best Christmas song."

"I'm with you there," Dorcas says, unlinking from Marlene and taking his hand. The five of them leg it as fast as they can on such uncertain ground, getting there just as the bearded beanie-clad lead singer begins, and everyone in the little crowd begins singing along.

Sirius and Dorcas sing the first verse to each other, hand in hand, and a few of the people in the crowd get their phones out and put on the torch, shining

them and whipping them around as the fast part of the song kicks in. Sirius gestures “come here” to Marlene, which she does - she runs and skids across a patch of ice, tactical, and it leaves Sirius in stitches in her arms as they twirl. Dorcas hops over and drags Remus out, Hope encouraging from behind, getting her phone out to film, and she twirls him around at the chorus even though he is that much taller and they laugh, her face lit up by the glow of the torches and his own warm from the wine and the energy in the air.

It’s infectious. It is just them, and the snow on the ground, and a million voices chanting the same song, the same tune, utter happiness and cheerfulness floating through the air.

Sirius, as an annoying homosexual, grabs Marlene’s face and puts on his best Kirsty MacColl impression directly to her which leaves her in hopeless giggles, and they hug, and then he spins her around and she twirls across the few feet or so between them like a ballerina, settling into Dorcas’ side like magic.

She kisses her, hard, and Remus laughs and turns to very nearly bump directly into one Sirius Black.

They’re chest to chest. There are lights shining everywhere, twinkling like stars, and Remus’ ears are warm and his feet are tingling with the vibrations of the band, and Sirius looks up at him and completely lights up, like a Christmas tree, brighter, embodiment of his namesake.

He takes Remus by the hand and drags him further into the crowd, surrounded by drunk people and happy humanity and families, children on shoulders, hands in the air, and they sing their little hearts out.

Sirius is expressive. He’s dramatic, he puts his heart into it. The chorus hits and it’s “*The boys in the NYPD choir still singing Galway Bay,*” and he’s twirling Remus around and they’re holding hands and shimmying, “*and the bells are ringing out for Christmas Day.*”

Remus feels light on his feet. Sirius makes him feel light on his feet. He’s utter joy, condensed into a man, cold fingers gripped around two wrists,

moving, jiving and it's all Christmas should be. It's all festivity is. A huddle of brilliant humanity in a tight-knit, uproarious community, corner of the world. Something you'd see on the television and in your weightless dreams. It's a core memory. Remus doesn't think he'll ever forget this.

The song ends, and they're still holding hands, held up to their chests. They're very, very close. Sirius takes a breathless gasp in and laughs, throws his head back and laughs some more. Remus cannot fathom being as happy as Sirius looks; it's entirely enthralling.

He looks so free. He *is* so free. Carefree like a hawk, just as high too, a ray of sun and a wisp of a cloud. He's in the air and he will never come down. Perhaps he's been there all along and Remus is simply joining him.

Sirius straightens his head. A strand of hair falls over his face, and then the wind blows it off. He looks perfect, red-flushed, curly haired, ghost of a smile on his face, ghost of a life and the most sustinent soul in his eyes. He tightens his grip on Remus' hands, and looks up at him.

"Kiss me," he says. As if it's nothing.

Remus takes a second to respond. The band starts playing a song that he recognises but can't place. The people are still dancing. "What?"

"Kiss me," he says, again, breathless. "Any couple would kiss, after that. Your mum is watching. It's perfect. Kiss me."

There's a moment, when they're in stasis. Swaying, slightly. Sirius' eyes are heavy-lidded and looking up at him, praying for something, praying to something; Remus can feel his skin around his fingertips, and it's burning hot. Molten silver. A shooting star.

He leans down. He kisses him.

Sirius' hands wrestle out of his grasp and move up, to cup his neck, his face. Their lips move tenderly, and Sirius tastes of the same wine that Remus feels at the back of his throat except it's like he's drowning in it, sloshed on it, on him. His hands grip at his waist and Sirius snakes his arms

around Remus' neck. Pulls him in. They're swaying, gently, and the crowd bustles around them, no one pays them a second glance, it's all just happiness and festivity and they are nothing but two people, two specks of dust in the universe, finding serenity in their hands in hair and their tongues, acquainted as Sirius tilts his head and pushes forward, leaking insanity into Remus' bloodstream. He's drunk. He's a soundwave, he's an off-kilter note choking out of a bad accordion, he's the floor as the crowds stomp and he's the kinetic energy emanating from where his hands are resting on Sirius' hips, sempiternal.

It's more than they need. It's more than anyone needs. It scratches an itch in Remus that he didn't realise was present. And they're eons further than fiction, but denial is stupid and contagious.

Sirius pulls away, barely. Their breaths are intermingling. His are coming in floods. He is a flood.

"Thank you," he breathes, into the little bubble they have created. Remus frowns.

"What the hell are you thanking me for?"

Sirius smiles. It's gentle. He's gentle.

"Listening," he says, and Remus' heart skips a beat.

He thinks, terrifyingly, that he could listen to Sirius forever.

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Sirius falls asleep on his shoulder during the drive home.

It's only 8pm, if that, and it's a twenty minute drive at most, but the day has been long. It's been exhausting. He's given a lot of himself, Remus thinks, and so he lets Sirius rest, sitting there, in the middle of him and Dorcas. He shuffles a little bit closer so his head is supported and puts a hand on his knee.

He shakes him awake when they pull up.



“Hey,” he murmurs, as Sirius sniffs and raises his head, bleary and confused. “We’re home.”

He blinks, frowns at Remus for a long, bewildered moment, and then clears his throat and nods. “Right,” he says, his voice scratchy with sleep, “Right.”

Remus walks him upstairs and he collapses onto his side of the bed, rubbing his hands harshly over his face. He watches from just inside the doorway.

“Go to sleep,” he says.

“It’s too early,” Sirius mumbles, dropping his hands to look up at the analog clock, displaying roundabout 8:35. “Can’t sleep.”

“Nap,” Remus says, shrugging. “For an hour. We won’t be doing anything exciting, I’ll wake you up so you don’t stay up through the night.”

Sirius contemplates this for a long moment, and then nods. He shrugs his coat off and then his socks and crawls into the bed in his clothes. He looks irrefutably small.

Remus comes to his bedside to turn off the lamp, and Sirius looks up at him with wide eyes.

“I thought we were home,” he mumbles, and they’re fluttering shut. “For a second.”

“Home?”

“Devon. When you said home.”

“Oh,” Remus says, because it’s all he can think to reply.

There’s silence for a moment.

“Didn’t want to be,” Sirius mumbles, pulling the duvet up so it’s almost covering his face, drowning him. It’s such a domestic scene that Remus feels the obscene urge to kiss his forehead or stroke his hair or bloody well climb in there with him.

He doesn't. He says "Oh," again, because it's all he can think to reply.

The lighting from the hallway is dim but Remus can see Sirius' face, the way innocence weaves through it when he's sleeping. His features are relaxed. His lips are naturally pouty, his bottom lip juts out, Remus had his tongue between them not an hour ago, it's something. He's very pretty. Remus can acknowledge that much and shove the rest away. He's very, very pretty.

And he has a lot of cause to think. He tiptoes out of the door and clicks it shut, letting Sirius sleep. Leans back against it and closes his eyes for two seconds.

He can't ignore the gnawing feeling in his gut that tells him how, how, how *right* this feels.

Come to think of it, he doesn't think he could grapple at any animosity for Sirius anymore. He doesn't think he can find it. His chest is a hollow, deep thing, dark and dimly lit and ribbed with bars and layered with dust, spluttering like a smoker against the beating of his heart, and he rumbles through the rubbish stored in there and can find nothing to hold against Sirius. All of the bad that Remus has held onto has seemingly been wiped away, dropped to the ground and splattered like acrylic in the Art classroom, held up by nothing when Sirius fell asleep and the stress that he carries in his face and on his shoulders dropped like the drop towers at theme parks. Caught in webbed memories but not carried by them anymore. Overflowed by— by— by what? By the superficiality of him? By the way he felt in Remus' hands and the way he felt on Remus' lips? By his pretty eyes, his objectively pretty features, his curls and his smile and the way the apples of his cheeks are perpetually held up, it's a full time job, scaffolding in his cheekbones; it's *not*. It's not any of these things. That is a whole other sector of Remus' chest, behind lock and key, filed in *sexuality* and *attraction* and *superficiality* and *shallowness*.

Sirius is three things. Everyone is three things. The preconception, the surface-level and the authentic. The prejudiced, the superficial and the real, the *actual*.

His actual smiles and his actual laughter. His actual heart, bones, holding Remus up on the ice rink and twirling, infatuated, music in one ear and out the other; he's a dancer. The real is breezing his way through life, superficial to all that is ignorant, that doesn't deign him exquisite enough to excavate. Hair blown back in lace and silk; the wind threatening to blow him away but he's planted there, firmly. You can't shake him. He's the moral of every story. He's a slap in the face. He's more than Remus thought.

Remus is, to put it frankly, an idiot.

He can admit that, now. It took the three steps to get here. It took channelling his own bitterness into hatred, seeing the surface level of the water as it ripples and not caring to check what it was that rippled but being irritated by the disturbance of the tranquil. It took carnal allure, beauty-pageant worthy, that's what he is, he's something to look at, a wall to knock down while you're too busy admiring the present to worry about the future, it took this and this to strip him down - no, strip Remus down. It took this and this to strip his stubbornness into seeing Sirius as someone he could like. Someone he could, maybe, trust. Someone that makes him laugh. Someone that he enjoys spending time with. He's spent almost three days with him, straight, and it's like a series of explosions has eroded the preconception and he's a raw little thing, standing before him, lying in his bed, small, to be built up. Built upon. He's potential. He's— they're— it's— potential.

He's a challenge, he's Snowdonia, he's the crunch of snow underneath Remus' feet, he's a map to be explored, an ocean to be charted, he's a friend, he's a foe. The iceberg archetype, again. He has so much life hidden inside of him Remus feels like it bleeds into him every night that they lie next to each other, and he wants to know more. He wants to know what else he was wrong about.

He wants to start over. He thinks he and Sirius can be friends. Really, after all of this is over, after everything, after his mother is appeased and the lonely fire in Remus' heart is appeased and Sirius gets his fill of wonder in Wales, he hopes they can start somewhere anew. Start somewhere with potential. Go a bit further.

It's foreign waters. Sirius kisses him out of obligation, not want, and it's foreign waters that he will not touch. Starting over is okay for now.

(Plus, he doesn't want to give Dorcas the satisfaction of being right.)

(It's a bit more than that, but he won't admit it to himself. Yet.)

## vi

He does wake up Sirius after an hour, like he said. In the five minutes that it takes for him to climb upstairs, rouse him, let him gather his bearings and return with him in tow, Dorcas and Marlene have fished Monopoly out from under the coffee table and have set it up, scandalous grins on their faces. The game lasts three hours until they're all exhausted and Marlene goes bankrupt, throwing her piece and then all of her houses at Dorcas in her exuberant (frankly, quite hilarious) anger, and Remus and Sirius clamber into bed with less than a word in their exhaustion, side by side.

Remus is awoken on the 23rd to something being thrown at his face.

He frowns, reaching a hand up to rest it on his forehead. Rubs it a little. He comes to his senses slowly and registers that his left hand is compromised; Sirius has rolled over, and he's slotted in next to him, very close.

Something else hits him. Remus groans and opens his eyes.

Jenny Howell is perched on the end of his bed, poised with a bobble between her forefinger on one hand and thumb on the other, ready to project it onto him.

"Oh, thank goodness," she says, flipping her bleach blonde hair over her shoulder. "I was about to run out of bobbles."

"Jen?" Remus says, slightly bewildered, and then she smiles, and he smiles, and, "*Jen*—"

She laughs as Remus sits himself up and she leans forward to engulf him in a strange little hug, laughing. She's younger than him but he feels so young. She's his favourite cousin - they grew up together, essentially, making mud pies in the forests nearby and doing flips on the trampoline until one of them got winded or hurt. She's larger than life, now, nothing like the toothy baby-faced nine year old that Remus used to stand tall and protective over at the wise old age of eleven. Jenny is three months into her masters at

Bangor after taking a couple years off, working in London, utilising her undergrad. He hasn't seen her since this time last year.

"You smell," is the first thing she says, properly, lovely as ever. Remus laughs into her shoulder. He feels Sirius shift from beside him, and it's a sentient shift - he's awake. As if on cue, he pulls the duvet up and over his head, and she laughs.

"Sorry," she whispers, pulling back. Remus ruffles his hair and rubs at his eyes. "Mum told me to come wake you up. Had to be a bit theatrical."

"You're a menace," he tells her, deadpan, grappling around him and throwing two loose bobbles at her. She laughs and staggers back, catching one while the other falls to the floor.

"Well, now you're awake," she says, shrugging. Poppy, who had fallen asleep on the top of the chest of drawers, for some reason, gets up, stretches and meows. Jenny whirls around and gasps; she hadn't noticed her there, evidently. "Oh, *baby*."

Remus clears his throat and takes a gulp of the glass of water at his bedside while she cuddles a very unhappy Poppy, and then frowns. "Wait, speaking of baby- if you're here...?"

"They're downstairs," Jenny says, smile growing on her face. "You'd better shower and get dressed first, though. Ronnie won't let you within ten metres of the kid unless you've scrubbed your hands red raw. She's neurotic."

"She's a first time mother," Remus says, pulling the duvet off and swinging his legs over the bed. "It's understandable."

"Gwen had a baby and was passing her around at the pub at two weeks old," Jenny shoots back, and Remus raises his eyebrows. Gwen is Jenny's ex-best friend. Remus has heard *many* an angry (usually drunk) voice message about Gwen, and so he replies,

"Is *Gwen* really your definition of responsible?"

She blinks. “You got me there.”

They laugh, and she pulls the door open, Poppy scrambling to be let down.

“I’ll let you get ready,” she whispers, eyes moving suggestively to the lump on the other side of his bed. Remus rolls his eyes and flips her the bird, and she leaves, laughing.

Sirius pulls the duvet down aggressively in one yank as soon as the door clicks shut.

“Jenny,” he says, firmly, and Remus swivels to look at him.

“Yes.”

“Cousin Jenny,” he continues, “sister to Ronnie, daughters of Julia Howell, who is Hope’s sister.”

“Correct.”

Sirius looks at him, for a moment, and then closes his eyes and smiles. Looks incredibly smug with himself.

“I listened,” he says, pleasantly, and Remus rolls his eyes, but he thinks it’s out of fondness.

“Ronnie has a kid,” Remus says, heaving himself up, “I forgot to mention.”

Sirius shoots up. “A *kid*?” he asks. “As in, a child? A human child?”

“No, a centaur,” Remus says sarcastically, fumbling for his glasses. “Yes, a human child.”

"How do you just *forget to mention that*?"

"I don't know," Remus replies, laughing. "I've never met the kid either. We'll be in the same boat."

“Oh, God,” Sirius says, deep crease between his brows, and this happens to be exactly the same thing he mumbles from behind Remus as they walk into the kitchen an hour later, showered and tooth-brushed, and the first greeting the both of them have of Aled Howell is him spitting up over Ronnie’s shirt.

“Delightful,” Remus says, as Ronnie laughs - what else can you do, honestly - and goes to clean him up. Hope steps in to help while Julia catches Remus’ eye, and her eye wrinkles glisten as she gets up and rushes towards him.

His Aunt Julia looks almost exactly like his mother, all brown hair and nose bump and filled out bottom lip, except she’s older, and her hair has salt and pepper-ed a bit over the years since she’s stopped dying it. She’s just as casual, however, in dungarees and a thick brown turtleneck. Her hair is in a French braid. She looks like something straight out of the nineties, and she’s absolutely ecstatic to see Remus.

Once she’s done hugging him and catching up, vaguely, (“It’s been so long, you’ve grown, I swear it, how’s life down with the Englishmen? How’s teaching? How are the kids? How is—”) and then she turns to Sirius, who looks slightly overwhelmed but brushes it off as unceremoniously as always and extends a hand to introduce himself.

And because Remus’ mother and her sister are simply twin siblings who were born five years apart, Julia pulls him in for a hug, immediately.

“Remus!” exclaims Ronnie, cleaned up after dipping into the back room to change. She rushes towards him, in all of her twenty-five year old harried single mother glory and gives him a big hug, as she always has - she almost matches him in height, taller than Jenny by miles. Her hair is in a bob, barely reaching her shoulders; she’s dyed it auburn recently to contest with her matriarchally inherited natural mousy brown. It glows on her, and she lights up when he compliments it.

Ronnie then shakes Sirius’ hand, which he seems comforted by, and Jenny introduces herself to him with a jovial wave and a “sorry for the wake up call”, which he assures her is fine.



It's a morning filled with catching up.

They sit around the table, Remus next to Sirius, his chair scooted as close to him as possible amongst his ruckus of a family that he loves so dearly as Hope talks and Julia matches her in energy, whilst Ronnie cradles Aled, breastfeeding at one point, and Julia shows Remus every single baby picture that she's taken in the two weeks that she's been home. It is, upon a count, approaching two hundred. Ronnie jokes that Jenny is more obsessed with her baby than she is and then feels bad about it and almost cries, cradling the kid to her chest. It's the postnatal hormones. They're a killer.

The kid is about four months now and genuinely adorable, with a wide little button nose and tiny grabby hands, wearing a babygrow that says "Mummy's little boy" on it that goes over his tiny little feet in such a way that makes Remus want to squeeze him to death, affectionately. He's got a tuft of honey coloured scruff, sort of Remus' colour but a bit lighter, and his tongue is in and out as he sort of gazes at every person with his big brown eyes, completely senseless. He's a gorgeous little thing.

The conversations are heavily family-based, but they still try to keep Sirius included, which Remus can tell means a lot to him. When Hope goes to the loo Jenny skirts across the seats until she's next to him and engages him in a conversation about music which somehow turns into a conversation about television which somehow turns into the story of how her ex threw her TV out of the window and she took him to court for it, which she usually saves for Christmas day, so Sirius must be extremely special for her to bang it out early - it delights him, regardless. Jenny's a brilliant storyteller and Sirius laughs so hard he has to get a drink of water. They take to him easily as everyone has, and when Julia grills him (in a nice, tame, calm sense, definitely) about himself, his life, his job, his friends he answers with ease and they find mutual topics that they enjoy talking about, including Wii Fit, Paul Wesley and a Tudor-centric Historical newsletter that they're both subscribed to - this one gets Sirius especially happy, it's almost infectious.

Aled is tiny in Remus' arms. Genuinely the tiniest little thing. He has a dummy in and his eyes are opening and closing, and Sirius peers over and looks at him, stars in his eyes.

“I bet you all my money that if you poke your finger into his belly he’ll grab it in his little fist,” Ronnie says, clearly egging him on to become acquainted, the lovely woman that she is, and Sirius looks at her, wary.

“Gently, of course,” Remus mutters as he settles in beside him, head basically on Remus shoulder, and Sirius scoffs.

“Oh, I was just going to stab the bloody thing,” he mutters, and Remus laughs, biting his lip, staring at him and his little golden tuft of hair and his forehead wrinkles and his slow, misguided movements, and Sirius reaches out and touches his tummy. Pokes it, incredibly softly.

Aled’s hands reach up and his tiny little fingers stretch out, and Sirius lets his own linger in their path. He does little grabby hands, pulling his left hand into a fist and pressing it to his chest, and then his eyes open and he reaches out for Sirius’ hand, beseeching, wide-eyed and innocent, and he grabs his forefinger. His little hand doesn’t even encompass three quarters of it, but he grips. Remus laughs, gently, and turns to look at Sirius. His jaw is dropped.

He reaches out and touches his head with his other hand, the free hand that Aled has not accosted, and strokes it with three fingers. Scratches the tuft of hair, gently, so gently, and the baby makes a pleasant gibberish noise and spits his dummy out. Sirius pulls his hand away from his head and over his face - Aled follows it - and then he leans forward and scratches him, oh so gently with his forefinger underneath his chin, and the baby laughs. He laughs.

Sirius laughs, with him, and Remus’ heart is on fire.

“Oh, he’s happy today,” he coos, rocking him slightly, and Aled lets go of Sirius’ finger but is still reaching out, and Sirius takes his hand between two fingers and shakes it, gentle, so gentle.

“Nice to meet you,” he whispers, and Aled laughs, as if he heard.

The whole table laughs with him.

They spend the next five minutes in a little bubble, as Julia goes to make tea and Ronnie, Hope and Jenny fall into a conversation about something or other. Remus rocks the baby and Sirius plays with him. Sirius figure out that Aled finds it drop dead bloody hilarious when he boops the kids nose and then immediately tickles his chin - he laughs, that baby laugh that is like no other and flails his hands, slightly, and so he lures him into a false sense of security by stroking his head and then launching into attack, which he finds doubly hilarious. Remus is in love. He is the sweetest little thing, this is the sweetest little thing, teasing him, laughing with this little creature; it feels like an alternate universe where nothing bad can happen, ever. Even when he starts crying and Ronnie takes him to calm him down, rocking him around the kitchen, Remus feels so utterly happy that he doesn't even notice when Sirius leans his head on his shoulder and makes a happy exhaling noise. He's just as content as him. A tranquil aura lays over the house like a thick coating of dust.

"I've never wanted kids," Sirius mutters to him, after Aled has stopped crying and is letting his mum hold him, pleasant, eyes searching, embracing the world, "but I want that one."

Remus, who is not expecting that ending, bursts out laughing.

He turns to Sirius, who is grinning, and shrugs. "He is a cute one."

"I want him. I would die for this baby, I don't think you understand."

"I do," Remus says, nodding, watching as he smiles in Ronnie's arms. "I've never really wanted them either. Not of my own, anyway."

"I always used to say that I only enjoy kids when I can give them back at the end of the day," Sirius jokes.

"Like Harry?"

"Like Harry!" He laughs, nodding. "He's too grown up now, though. He's nine in July. Would you bloody believe it?"

"No, honestly," Remus says. "He's still so little."

And then, after a moment,

“You really love him, don’t you?”

Sirius looks at him, and nods.

“I saw that picture,” Remus explains, briefly, “on the— uh, at the party, at your house. On your dresser, I think. You, James and Harry.”

Sirius’ eyes flicker with recognition. “*Oh*. Yeah. That was taken on a Haven caravan holiday two years ago.” He pauses. “I do love him, a lot.”

Remus hums, nodding. “Lily seems to think you’re a brilliant Godfather.”

Sirius’ eyebrow raises. “Oh, so you’ve talked about me to Lily?”

“No,” Remus jokes, scoffing.

“What did you say? What did she say? I have an intrinsic need to know what people are saying about me.”

Remus laughs inwardly at the irony that *he* has an intrinsic need for *ignorance* on these sort of qualms. He answers anyway,

“It was just when she told me they were going to Jaipur,” he says, “and she felt terrible about leaving you behind for Christmas. That’s how I knew you weren’t doing anything. If you ever wondered.”

“Oh, that daft woman,” Sirius mutters, resting his head in one hand, elbow on the table. “I told her a billion times that it was fine, you know.”

Remus shrugs. “She’s an empathetic goddess,” he says. “She cried over Molly Weasley not winning a Matalan gift voucher, I think feeling sad about abandoning you for Christmas is bottom of the barrel, to be honest.”

“I wasn’t abandoned,” Sirius says, all too quickly, all too harshly, “I could’ve bloody spent Christmas alone.”

Remus blinks. And then he nods.

“I know,” he says.

There’s an awkward moment, in which Sirius feels ashamed of his outburst, and Remus simmers in the fact that he understands a little bit more about where it came from. *It’s okay*, he wants to say, but he has to wait for Sirius to get there first.

“I didn’t–” he starts, and then he closes his mouth. Aled does something exciting and all of the women cheer and coo, and Remus nods him on.

Sirius’ eyes flicker around the room, taking in the snug, homely atmosphere, and then he sighs.

“I’m glad that you invited me here,” he says, earnest, locking eyes with Remus, and the world sort of stops.

And Remus is glad too. He’s really glad.

“I didn’t mean–” he continues, and he doesn’t have to, he doesn’t–

“I know,” Remus interjects, nodding. He feels gentle. Sirius makes him feel *gentle*, like he’s holding that child all over again. Like he wants to build a suit of armour around his heart and never let him go. He’s a strange thing. He’s going to miss it, when all of this ends, he thinks.

Sirius smiles, and then Aled spits up again, and it’s chaos all around.

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Because the Howell’s are here, Hope deems it of the utmost importance that they go to Pembroke Castle for the day, to fulfill a sort of bi-yearly tradition that their side of the family has going on.

Remus forgets, sometimes, that Sirius is a History teacher, until they go to a historical National Trust landmark and he loses his fucking mind.

Needless to say, he is absolutely delighted.

It's a twenty minute drive, but due to the baby can't be done all in one car, so Remus drives Sirius and Jenny (and Fizzy) in his truck whilst Hope drives Jenny, Ronnie and Aled in his little car seat in her car, behind them. Sirius has never been to Pembroke, despite it showing up on his syllabus a few times - he's visited Caernarfon on a trip with his Year 11's a few years ago, and Conwy on his own a few times, apparently - and so Jenny tells him as much as she can remember about it, however she is a Law student, not a History student, and thus it is not much.

The castle is gorgeous in the snow. Remus has seen it a few times like this, tall and regal and glistening, but it takes Sirius' breath away. They park in the car park down the road and he gets out and simply gapes, his cheeks slightly flushed and his navy blue scarf flapping in the wind behind him; he looks like a painting. It's overcast and cloudy, and Remus has seen the castle in nicer forms; seen it under sunlight, starlight, the casting of moonshadows and the bath of the golden hour but it's all new to Sirius. His appreciation is endearing. He thinks it's beautiful.

Remus discovers on the walk up, Fizzy tugging on her lead, that Sirius wrote a six thousand word essay on twelfth century architecture, which doesn't surprise him, to be honest. He links his arm into Remus' while the rest of his family walk slowly behind them and natters on about god knows what, the arches in Romanesque architecture and Byzantine castles and Henry the bloody fifteenth (the *seventh*, Remus finds out when their tour guide tells them all about how he was born here - he was close enough. There are too bloody many for his liking.) (Sirius knows them all by heart and has preferences.) (Henry V, in his personal opinion, is the greatest King England ever saw and they will pry Agincourt off the syllabus out of his cold, dead hands.)

They go on a little hour's long guided tour around the castle, led by a lovely tour guide called Alice, who is freckly and ginger and looks absolutely fucking freezing in her parka yet has the widest smile on her face and even more enthusiasm than Sirius, which is shocking. It's gorgeous, it really is. Remus enjoys the nostalgia, the breeze, Jenny enjoys the sights, Sirius enjoys the history and Fizzy has the time of her life sniffing peoples toes and sticking her bum out at babies in buggies, Aled included. Remus finds

himself quite interested in the history, actually, seeing as he hasn't been on a tour in years - actually, has he ever? - and so he gets quite enraptured in what she tells them, all of the history behind tower after tower, figure after figure, Arnulf de Montgomery to Owain Glyndwr to Margaret Beaufort, mother to a future monarch at thirteen years old. They walk past a plaque with a poem about Henry VII on, alongside his history, in which it states that he defeated Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth.

"Richard III," Remus says. "Is that the guy they found under a car park?"

"Yes," Sirius says, laughing.

"That's not a very courteous way to bury a king."

Sirius purses his lips. "Well, it wasn't a car park when they buried him. Henry VII had him buried in a monastery - *that's* courteous, for a man he'd just bloody murdered and succeeded - and then his son dissolved them all fifty odd years later, so the church was knocked down and his tomb was lost. And by then... well, nobody really cared about him much. He had been ruined by Tudor propaganda. He was the king Shakespeare wrote a tyrannical play about - he was the one who they all thought murdered the princes in the tower."

This is a lightbulb moment for Remus. "*Oh!* Right, him!"

"Yeah, I thought you'd know that one," Sirius says, walking with him along the ruins. "He's been getting more traction lately."

"Has he? Why?"

"There's a society of people formed this past century who love him and are obsessed with fixing his bad reputation. Call themselves Ricardians."

"That's a bit culty."

Sirius laughs. "They might be a bit obsessive, but they found his bloody body, so evidently they're doing *something* right."

Remus hums. "Do you like him?"

“Do I *like* any of them?” Sirius scoffs. “I think Henry VIII is the most interesting guy to ever exist, but I can’t stand the ugly prick.”

Remus laughs.

“Do you think he did it, then?” he presses, rewording. “Killed the boys in the tower, I mean.”

Sirius hums. Remus turns to him and he’s squinting in thought. They step down two steps and end up back on the grass, parallel to the Great Map of Wales, and Sirius exhales.

“I don’t know,” he says, eventually, “and isn’t that the most interesting thing? That, hundreds of years later, I still don’t know? Some people think he did it, some people think he paid someone off to do it. A lot of people think it was Buckingham. I have a friend *convinced* it was Buckingham.”

Remus, who does not know who Buckingham is, simply nods.

“I think one of the most alluring things about History is the way that it is shaped by our modern world-view,” he continues. “I’ll never know what it’s like to walk the streets of Tudor England, all I have is,” he brings a hand up to tap his temple, “up here. And it’s continuously ongoing. We have the fantastical noble aspect of it and then we have *real fucking life*, and they’re so separated, two entirely different things, and we’re constantly learning more. Like - I have a friend who writes out transcripts for early modern epistolary artifacts and wills. Shit happens in their lives just like it happened in ours, but it was so *different* for them. I think the unknown is what keeps it interesting. If I knew everything, what would be the point in continuing?”

Remus smiles. He understands that. He feels Sirius’ vitriol. He feels the same way about books, about textual criticism, about thought and feeling and idealised poetry. And, in a way, they sort of intertwine. Like the way that their arms are linked, their passions knot together like red ribbons, classical and regal like an out of tune grand piano, a broken floorboard and a wheezing chimney.



Julia, Ronnie and Hope split off at one point due to the fact that Ronnie has a buggy and the rocks get slightly jagged around certain places, and so they walk. Jenny deposits herself besides Remus and they talk, emphatically, the three of them, about everything and nothing and this and that.

They get a bit distracted at the Great Map (which dropped Sirius' *entire* jaw when he saw it for the first time.) Jenny texts her sister to meet them back at the cafe, and they grab a table. While she's at the counter nabbing a coffee, Sirius turns his chair to face Remus.

"Yes?" Remus says, dryly, before he looks up, but his face falls slightly when he looks at Sirius and sees that he looks somewhat nervous. "You alright?"

Sirius opens his mouth to speak, and then his eyes flicker to somewhere just over Remus' shoulder. He pauses, for a moment, mouth open in stasis, and then he ducks.

Remus jumps.

"What?" he hisses, as Sirius cranes his head, squeezing his eyes shut. It is almost like he's cringing.

"Tilly," he whispers.

"Who?"

"Tilly!"

"From school?"

"Yes, from school, you moron!"

Remus locks eyes with him, sheltered by his own torso from the sight that he's sure he'll see if he turns. He blinks.

"Maybe she'll leave," Sirius whispers. "I'll just stay down here, and maybe she'll leave."

“Good God,” Remus mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose. He takes a deep breath and turns around, ever so slightly, ever so slowly, scanning all of the families in his peripheral until he catches the one that he recognises. And it is Tilly. She’s with her mum and dad and a little Border Terrier that looks older than she is.

He doesn’t catch Tilly’s eye. Her dad - Remus has met him on parents evenings but can’t remember his name - gets up to get into the queue at the counter, and Tilly is stroking her fat little geriatric dog, and her mum looks around.

He locks eyes with her mum.

His neck spins around like that of a bloody owl. Sirius is still crouching.

“Nida Saeed incoming,” he says, and Sirius raises his eyebrows.

“Huh?”

“Nida Saeed, Nida, mother Tilly, eye contact—”

A shadowy figure slots itself into the little space between their chairs, tall to Remus, probably even taller to Sirius who is still crouching down and very obviously hiding from the woman standing before them. She smiles.

“Oh, I thought it was you two,” she says, flicking her dark bangs out of her face and smiling - Remus smiles back, gritting his teeth as he kicks Sirius under the chair and gets him to straighten up.

“Hi!” Remus says, placidly, “fancy running into you here.”

He reaches out a hand, and she shakes it, and Sirius puts on his best award-winning smile and reaches out his hand afterwards.

They don’t get another word in before Tilly is trudging along, dragging her heels and whining, “*Mum.*”

“It’s your teachers, darling!” she says. Tilly looks less than happy.

“I *know*,” she says, awkward. And it’s not that Tilly doesn’t like her teachers, it’s more that she is feeling embarrassed as hell. Remus understands. He once saw Christopher at Alton Towers with a boyfriend - they went on the same ride. At the same time. *Utter* embarrassment. It has taken them two years to get over it. Sometimes when Chris’s hair is too mussed from the way he runs his hands through it to impress Izzy, Remus gets dreadfully embarrassing flashbacks and has to sit down.

“Hi, Tilly,” he says, pleasantly, regardless. Sirius holds up a hand and gives her a little wave. She looks like she wants the earth to swallow her up whole, but it’s okay, because so does Remus.

Nida, on the other hand, is delightful. She’s genuinely a sweet woman - Remus has always had a little breath of fresh air on parent evenings when he sees her sitting in the waiting seats. Even despite how problematic Tilly can be, she tries her best at the subject, which really is the bare minimum and leaves her amiable enough with Remus to not dread having her in his class, even though she could talk for bloody England. She’s funny, though. He prefers the funny chatty kids to the boring chatty ones. At least he gets a bit of enjoyment out of it.

“What an odd place to see you,” Nida comments, pleasantly, “a bit far from home, right?”

Sirius hums, and Remus smiles, and says, “I’m actually from the area, so...”

“Oh!” she says, acting shocked as if she hasn’t been hearing the bloody Welsh lilt in his voice for the better part of five years, “Whereabouts?”

“Up near Haverfordwest.”

“Ah,” she says, amiable, “Tilly’s grandma lives up in Carmarthen. We alternate Christmases.”

“Oh, I love Carmarthen,” Remus says, acquiescing to small talk. Tilly is standing looking extremely bored, senior dog lying at her heel.

Nida turns to Sirius, and there's a question in her eyes.

"Are you from the area, then, Mr. Black?" she asks, and, *goddamn*, Remus can appreciate this woman's thirst for gossip. Sirius smiles.

"No, I'm not," he says.

And Nida opens her mouth to speak once more, but at that very moment Jenny returns, handling a tray with three coffees, a pot of tea and a scone. She's focusing very heavily on the coffees, as they're about to spill over, so she does not look up before she says—

"Alright, lovebirds. I have acquired the good caffeine."

—and Remus is going to die. The earth is going to swallow him whole.

Tilly smirks, gently - he can *see* it, the adolescent bugger, hiding behind her sleeve - and Sirius' lips go paper thin. Remus takes a deep breath in as Jenny deposits the tray and looks up, at Nida, who's looking at her, shell-shocked.

"Oh," Jenny says.

"Jen, this is Nida, and Tilly," Remus says, gesturing to them respectively. "I teach Tilly at school. Or— we both do."

"Mhm," Sirius grunts.

"This is my cousin, Jenny," Remus explains as Jenny shakes Nida's hand. It is such a strangely awkward situation he actually wants to laugh.

"It's lovely to meet you," she says, smiling at Jenny who takes this in her stride and grins back. Tilly is laughing. Remus watches as Sirius locks eyes with her and gives her a typical teacher glare, but she doesn't stop. He has no authority here. He's... powerless.

"We're actually here with family," Remus says, basically just desperate to get her to go away, now, and for Tilly to stop laughing no matter how hard she's trying to stop, "spending Christmas up in my childhood home."

“Right,” Nida says, nodding, “Nothing like a Welsh Christmas, eh?”

Remus does not know what that entails but he nods along. Sure.

“I’ll let you get on, then,” she says, smiling. “Lots to explore!”

“Absolutely,” Sirius says, and then, turning to Tilly, “lots of useful information for your exams, here.”

“I don’t want to think about exams right now,” Tilly says, nose scrunched up, and Sirius considers this.

“Eh,” he says, “True. I’ve no right to say that. You know what, ignore *all* of the history. It’s bloody Christmas. Have a good one, guys.”

Tilly grins, and Nida laughs. Sirius smiles and waves them off as they retreat back to their table, and then turns, covers his face, and says, immediately;

“I want to die.”

Jenny bursts into laughter. Remus sympathises with both parties. It is irrevocably funny and irrefutably life-ruining. He thinks he probably looks like a tomato, right now.

“I’m never showing my face in that school again.”

“Sorry,” Jenny offers, still laughing. Sirius groans into his hands.

“She’s the school bloody *gossip*,” he says, sitting up with a lot of energy and flicking his hair over his shoulders. “It’ll be spread like wildfire. It’ll be on the pinboards. She’ll project it onto a bloody billboard along with our faces and probably a protest to cancel GCSE’s or something.”

Remus rolls his eyes at the dramatics and takes his coffee off of the tray, depositing it in front of him as he rants.

“Drink your bloody coffee and calm down,” he says, and Sirius sneers at him.

He still drinks the coffee and he smiles, gently, into the mug.

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They're halfway home, singing along to *Wham!*, when the ground dips and all three of them jolt.

Sirius in the front seat, turns to look at him. Jenny leans forward and shoves her head between the two front seats. They sort of blink at each other. George Michael is still singing; Sirius turns it down.

"What was that?" Sirius asks, trying to peer to look out of the front windscreen. "Drive."

Remus pushes the pedal down, and the wheel spins, whirrs, but they do not move.

"We're stuck," he mutters, clicking his seatbelt off and opening the door. The other two do the same, and Remus sees the headlights as his mother's car drives up to them, where they were following.

Sirius circles the front of the car just as Remus is examining the truck tires. There is a thick layer of snow - it's snowing, now, very lightly, but it did overnight and these back roads seemingly haven't been used enough to be flattened. He gets Jenny to go in and press the pedal down again for a moment, and, yes, they're stuck. It's dark and he can't tell but he thinks the dirt road dipped, and the dip was covered by the snow - or perhaps exacerbated by it. The more Jenny revs the wheels, the more his tires coat themselves in dry mud - the worst kind, honestly - and the more the snow around them bleeds brown, muck and twigs and ice flicking out of the rift as it moves.

Hope and Julia come out of the car and the five of them try their best to push the truck back, pressing on the bonnet with all the strength they can muster - Ronnie comes to help for a moment, leaving Aled bundled up and asleep in the car seat, but it's no use. It doesn't budge.

“Christ,” Remus mutters, trying the pedals one last time to no avail. It’s about 3:30pm, and starting to get dark rapidly. Aled needs to be fed and attended to, and they’re all freezing to the tips of their toes. “I knew we should’ve gone on the A4076.”

“I can drive home and fetch Lyall?” Hope offers. “He has tow rope from work. It’s only about ten minutes, now.”

“Seems like the only option,” Remus says, inspecting the tires one last time, “Take who you can home with you, I’ll wait.”

“There’s only one seat left,” she says, somewhat nervously, looking between Jenny, sitting in the front seat, and Sirius, leaning against the bonnet.

There’s a moment of silence.

“Take Jen,” Sirius says. “I can wait here with Remus. She’s been complaining about the cold for three hours.”

“Have *not*,” Jenny says, petulantly.

“You absolutely have.”

She exhales, cold, visible air. “I mean, I’m not gonna say *no*,” she says, hopping out of the car, shivering - theatrically - as she does.

Remus turns to Sirius.

“Is that okay with you?” he murmurs, serious and low enough for no one else to hear.

Sirius nods. “It’s fine.”

“Are you sure?” Remus asks, concerned; focusing in on Sirius’ red nose, how he’s sniffing in the cold.

He exhales, slowly. It’s hesitant.

“If it’s okay with you, it’s okay with me,” he says, quietly, and Remus blinks.

“Of course it’s okay with me.”

“Then I’m fine,” Sirius says instantly, smiling. “Honestly. Your car has good heating anyway.”

Remus looks at him, deeply, making sure, and then bites his lips. “Okay.”

He nods. “Okay.”

Hope departs with a cold kiss on his cheek and a promise that they’ll be fifteen minutes, max, and Sirius clambers into the car while Remus lets Fizzy out of where she’s been riding happily in the boot, letting her in the backseat with them. She gets overly excited at Sirius and pushes herself through the little gap, projecting herself into his lap in the front seat. When Remus gets in she’s there, laughing.

“Oh, *Fizzy*,” he mutters, swatting at her gently to get her to stop. Sirius doesn’t seem to care. “She’s getting muck all over you.”

“I don’t mind,” he laughs as she licks his face. He shudders. “Oh, you’re warm, Fizz.” He gives her a full body pet, two palms in the fur around her face and down her body, patting her on the back, and she wags her tail and plods herself clumsily around his lap until she finds a space that she’s comfortable with. It’s a sweet sight.

“She’s really taken to you,” Remus points out, and Sirius nods, burying his red face into her fur. He has black fabric gloves on and runs his fingers over her head, thumbing her ears. “She’s never liked me that much.”

“I’m the dog whisperer,” Sirius says when he surfaces for air. “They gravitate to me.”

“Oh, bollocks,” Remus says, and Sirius laughs.

“Come on,” he says. “Has to be. Why else would she like me so much?”



Remus looks at him, and opens his mouth. Nothing comes out, even though he can think of a few reasons, actually.

Remus turns the heating up all the way it'll go and leans back, watching the sun slowly go down so much earlier than it should. It's just a dirt road, lined with trees to the right and a marshy field to the left. It slopes down into the Cleddau Du. Remus has taken Fizzy on walks down by that river, granted further up - looking out here, though, he reckons she'd adore the open space and the flowing river that it bleeds into. He takes a deep breath in, watching tree branches sway aggressively in the wind. It's snowing gently.

He puts on the windshield wipers, and winces. The joints in his fingers are fucking killing. He pulls open the little hatch, exhaling cold air that turns warm in the car heating, and is glad to see that he left a few splints in there at some point. He slots them on, and Sirius watches, scratching behind Fizzy's ear.

"Ring splints," Sirius notes, and Remus nods. "My uncle used to wear them. Do they really help?"

"They really do," he chuckles, leaning his head back and trying to disconnect himself from his body. Trying to disconnect himself for everything but the cells on his skin bed, ready to embrace the warmth from his car. It tickles the back of his neck like a trickle of water travelling down his spine.

"Rheumatoid arthritis," he says, outright, because he knows Sirius is wondering, and he's sick of people asking. "Diagnosed at seventeen."

It is silent, for a moment, save for Fizzy's panting.

"I'm sorry that you have to deal with that," Sirius says, eventually. "That's a terrible thing to be diagnosed with regardless, never mind at such a young age."

Remus looks at him, and Sirius is earnest. His hand is still, fingers thick with Fizzy's fur, and he gives him a soft smile when Remus looks. He takes a breath and he nods.

“Thank you,” he says, finding that he means it; finding that, of all of the shit that people have said to him over the years, of infantilization and comparison, Sirius’ is nothing but empathy.

“Does the cold make it worse?” Sirius asks, quietly, looking down at his fingers. Remus isn’t wearing gloves - it’s not for lack of having them, they’re somewhere in the back of the car, but he took them off to drive when it got warm and wasn’t expecting to have to stand out in the cold for twenty minutes trying to unstick a mud-stained truck.

“Yes,” he says, feeling his fingers prickle as the heating warms them up. “Most of the time.”

“Do you have your gloves?” Sirius asks, turning around to look. “Or do you want mine? Fizzy’s warmed my hands right up.” A pause, and then, “Or you could just have Fizzy. She’s a canine heater. I won’t take all of your Fizzy time, even though it’s clear she prefers me more.”

Remus bites his lip and then laughs, out loud, looking out through the windscreen at the darkening evening. Sirius laughs too and it perks Fizzy up; she sits, looking between the two, shoving her head into the crook of Sirius’ neck and licking the side of his face.

“It’s okay,” Remus says, reaching out a hand to calm her down. She does; he runs his fingers through her fur and smiles as she pants, looking at him with her wide, adventurous eyes. “The heating is working well enough. You can have your Fizzy time.”

Sirius smiles. “Thank you. I would have missed her.”

“She’d be sat right next to you.”

“Too far,” he coos, rubbing at her face once more, “that’s too far, isn’t it, gorgeous?”

Remus chuckles, taking a deep breath and looking out of his window. He watches as two wild rabbits scamper through the snow. It’s the picture of innocence.

They fall into idle conversation for maybe ten minutes, maybe a bit less. Remus tells him about the bunnies and Sirius talks about the castle. He professes his love for the area, the country, the nature. Tucks his hair behind his ears and their conversation flows so fluidly Remus is surprised that this is the same person on the balcony of the Christmas party, surprised this is the same person in the staff room going on about bugging igneous rocks, voice grating at his very bones. Sirius' voice, now, settles like honey into his stomach. He's warmth, warmer than his car heater, survivable on his own.

There's a minute or so where they're silent. Fizzy is asleep on Sirius' lap; her legs are half falling off, but she seems content enough. Remus rests his forehead on the window and takes a deep breath in.

"Remus?"

"Mm?"

He doesn't reply immediately, so Remus lolls his head to look at him. He looks nervous again.

"About the kiss," Sirius blurts. Remus straightens up.

"The kiss," he says, nodding for him to go on.

"I wanted to say—" Sirius starts, thinning his lips, and then, "Sorry?"

Remus narrows his eyes. "What are you sorry for? I kissed you."

"I told you to, and we said we weren't going to do on the lips—"

"At the end of the day, it doesn't *mean* anything," Remus says, before he can even think, and Sirius blinks. "Like- I mean, a kiss on the cheek versus a kiss on the lips. It's not the end of the world."

Sirius smiles, and nods. It doesn't look genuine.

"And," Remus continues, feeling a strange dry feeling in his mouth and the need to continue speaking and the feeling in his gut that he's *lying, lying*,

lying, “if I’m going to have to kiss *anyone*, I’m glad it’s you. You’re... whatever the kids say. *Easy on the eyes*, etcetera, etcetera.”

It is a joke. Sirius doesn’t laugh.

“So,” he says, after a moment, “when this is over...”

“Mm?”

“Are we— I mean, us,” he says, and when Remus quirks his eyebrows, he says, “are we just going to go back to normal?”

It’s a brief, small whisper. His eyebrows are slightly creased and there’s tension in his jaw. Remus sighs.

“No,” he says, speaking his mind. He looks at Sirius and smiles. “I think a lot has changed in the past few days, no?”

Sirius raises an eyebrow. “You didn’t like me,” he states.

“I didn’t know you,” Remus says, quietly. And that’s it, really. He didn’t. And now he does. To an extent. The extent seems to be enough. “I’ve discovered, against my own better judgement, that you’re not the most intolerable person in the world.”

Sirius smiles, though it doesn’t reach his eyes. He looks down to the floor and then says, “I’m not Severus Snape.”

“No, you’re not. Nowhere near.”

There is a moment, and then Sirius seems to remember what happened all at once.

“My God,” he moans, leaning forward and resting his head in his hands. It makes Fizzy startle. “I *punched* him.”

Remus bursts out laughing. Sirius’ shoulders shake, whether he wants them to or not.

“It was brilliant,” Remus says. “When we get back and you inevitably get called in to talk to Minerva with him I hope you know I’m gonna need to be on the phone the whole time. I need to witness that. Now we’ll be friends and all.”

Sirius turns, resting the side of his head in one palm, now, looking at him. He screws his face up, and says, “James already bagsied that, sorry.”

“Fuck,” Remus says, faux-agitated. Sirius giggles, looking up at him. “Maybe I can tap into Snape’s phone. I’ll get Pete to do it. He’s good at computer stuff.”

He smiles, and the conversation falls into a sort of lull. Remus’ phone buzzes in his pocket and he checks it, and Sirius is watching him the whole time.

Sirius inhales and he hears a whisper. Sounds something along the lines of “*friends*.”

He turns and raises an eyebrow. Sirius is watching him with a blank expression on his face.

“Hm?”

“What?”

“Did you say something?” Remus asks, and Sirius sits up, finally, runs a hand through his hair, blinks profusely a few times, and then shakes his head.

“No,” he says. “I didn’t say anything.”

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Lyall makes it just in time and helps tow Remus’ car out of the dip. It’s really very satisfying when it jolts out, and his truck tires are mud-stained now but he doesn’t mind. The snow micromanages it. He drives up the A4076, the safe option, to pass round the ring road onto the A40 and eventually pull into their little village, a hero home from war. Jenny whips

the curtains open from the front room as they pull in and cheers inaudibly, plate of Victoria Sponge in her hand and in her mouth, and then Dorcas appears beside her with a glass of wine in her hand and Remus thinks that they're in for a night of chaos if those two are together. (It's not even 4pm.)

The cottage is packed for the night. It's the Lupin's, the Howell's, the Meadowes', Sirius and Marlene and all of the energy and festivity and domestic spirit that comes with their little mixed family. Rory Hope and Julia natter like old ladies over cups of tea and a cheese board in the kitchen, bottle of wine on standby, as Jenny and Dorcas corner Sirius and Remus and Marlene have a rather intense game of Uno that he is sure she cheats in, because she wins four times in a row, even when Ronnie joins. Then, eventually, Sirius swoops in and takes her crown, and they arm wrestle it out. (He wins.)

Ronnie puts Aled down for a nap and everyone sort of migrates to the living room. And Remus finds it strange to separate them by the 'adults' and the 'kids' when the majority of the kids are pushing thirty, the youngest being Ronnie at twenty-five, but in such a nostalgic space of his childhood dreams, running about barefoot, up and down the stairs with his favourite cousins, shenanigans he can't help but revert back to that stage, nattering with them about generational things while the *adults* do their *adult talking*. Remus ends up sitting on the sofa next to his dad with Sirius between his legs, sitting on the floor. A bottle of cabaret is shared between them all - Sirius takes it, but Remus knows damn well he won't drink it so he hauls himself up, steals the glass and fishes a Chablis out of the cupboard, which he takes to happily. He settles back into his space between Remus' legs, back against the sofa, and, at some point, Remus' hands migrate to his hair and he spends about half an hour sifting through his curls, slowly and tenderly. Sirius sips his wine and leans back and closes his eyes, content.

They kiss three more times, throughout the night.

The first is rather early on. Lyall takes Rory and Martin upstairs to look at some curtain pole or something that he installed recently, and Sirius pulls himself up from where he's sat on the floor (across the room - this is before he sits between Remus' legs, seemingly where he belongs) and sits himself down in the free space with a grand huff.

Remus turns, and Sirius turns, and they turn; too quickly and all too fervently. Their faces are very, very close. Sirius crosses his legs. They're being watched.

Sirius' lip quirks up, as Remus' eyes move to them. He looks at him, raises his eyebrows in a question - Sirius gets it, he seems to get him - and upon his nod he leans forward and kisses him.

Sirius kisses him back - it's chaste, only long enough for him to reach up with one hand and place it on his chin, over his jawline, and then he's pulling away, and he's smiling. He flicks his hair over his shoulder and turns to look at Remus' cousins, on the floor, who immediately act like they weren't watching. Things go on as usual.

The second is when Hope whacks on a bit of Bublé.

Julia and Ronnie have to go at about six. They're staying nearby, in the house that was Remus' grandfather's and his mother and aunt's childhood home, that they now rent out for most of the year but keep vacant over holidays to stay close. Aled needs to be put down - he's asleep, already, lights out completely and yet it doesn't stop everyone from fawning over him and kissing his little forehead. It doesn't stop Sirius from stroking his little golden hair and thumbing his forehead, tiny, tender skin, smiling softly, tipsy, flushed. Remus pulls him back by the waist as they leave and his hands linger there for a moment too long.

And perhaps it's his simple want to be touched that leads them, just after they leave (Lyall offers to drive Jenny later on, so she stays longer) dancing in the kitchen, Bublé playing on the speakers. Dorcas has her arms wrapped around Marlene, back hugging her, and Jenny is drunk and *going* for it, attempting a moonwalk that Remus is sure has Michael Jackson turning in his grave, and Remus spins Sirius.

His hair twirls and his shirt flutters like he's a ballerina, directly into Remus' arms, and it seems only right to hold him there for half a second too long and kiss him, fiercely, pushing in so far that Sirius' back curves and his hands come to cup Remus' face. It's deeper and realer and rather scary in the way it makes every single cell on the surface of Remus' body come

alight. He's shocked when Sirius drops his hands to see that the palms aren't singed, that he hasn't lit up the universe with how it feels to kiss him, it's been so long. He's been so lonely, and Sirius is so gorgeous.

It's the third that is the real kicker, because Jenny prowls in, into the room that is just the five of them and Rory and Hope, still going at 10pm, and she has a mistletoe on a stick.

"Shit on a stick!" Remus says, completely on instinct when he sees it. Sirius bursts out laughing and collapses into his chest. It sets his nerves alight. Remus is drunk.

"Mistletoe," Jenny says, flourishing it. "Bought this at the Christmas market." She shoves it in all of their faces, and it's not, per say, a novelty toy - it's evidently made for novelty *purposes*, but it's a proper mistletoe, all sparse leaves and white bulbs and a red ribbon wrapped around the top.

She does a theatrical little dance and stops, tiptoeing, reaching her hand out, and the mistletoe swings above Hope and Rory.

Rory laughs, dismissive, and then Hope leans over and lands a big fat smoocher on her cheek. The whole room laughs as she gasps and then launches over to get her revenge, and Jenny dances around the room once more, almost knocking over an empty bottle that Dorcas catches skilfully.

It lands next above Dorcas and Marlene. They both roll their eyes and lean in - Dorcas reaches out a hand to vaguely hide them from her mother, who laughs and shakes her head fondly. Marlene cups her face and smiles against her mouth, then collapses of embarrassment into the crook of her neck.

Jenny does a little twirl again. It's obvious where it's going now. Sirius is sitting beside him, empty wine glass in hand, drunk-flushed and slick-lipped, and the mistletoe lands above them. They both look up at it.

Remus locks eyes with Dorcas, first. It's brief. For a second. She smirks, raises an eyebrow, and then he forgets about her to look at the pretty thing sitting next to him, looking, just looking, and he leans in.



He cups Sirius' face and he kisses him, and it's deep, it's flawless.

Sirius pushes in. He's aggressive, like a blizzard, tongue in Remus' mouth and his hand falls to his chest. Gripping the fabric of his shirt. Remus turns his head to slot his nose on the other side of him and bites his bottom lip, a little bit, and then pulls back. Presses one soft kiss to his lips. Leans back an inch, two, and Sirius looks dazed. His hand is still scrunching up Remus' shirt like it's the only thing grounding him to earth. He swallows, viscerally, and Jenny moves on, happy with her escapade, plonking herself down next to Marlene, and Sirius turns. Looks into space, directly in front of him, unseeing. He takes a deep breath, and conversation restarts around them, but it's not domestic, it's restricting.

Sirius' throat constricts, as if he's choking, and then he shakes his head.

"I can't do this," he murmurs, low enough so that only Remus can hear it, and he gets up and leaves the room, movements clunky and tipsy. Remus watches him go.

He turns, and he locks eyes with Dorcas. She is glaring at him.

His lips part, in confusion, and he shakes his head. Raises his eyebrows. She rolls her eyes, and gestures to the door.

Go, she mouths, and Remus takes a deep breath.

He goes.

Sirius is upstairs. He opens the door to the bedroom gently and peers in, and he's sitting on the side of the bed, rubbing his face with both of his hands.

He looks up and in the same breath stands when Remus enters. He closes the door behind him.

"Are you okay?" Remus asks, and he stares. And then he laughs.

"Am I okay," he breathes, covering his face with his hands, covering his face. "Am I okay? I don't know. I don't know, actually."

Remus takes a gentle step forward. He's unsure of what he's going to do; his body seems to crave something his mind cannot process. "What is it?"

Sirius doesn't respond. He drops his hands, and doesn't meet Remus' eye.

"Is it... the kissing?" he asks, tentatively. Sirius inhales sharply through his teeth. "We don't have to. If you're uncomfortable with it, I'd never ask you to—"

"I'm not uncomfortable," Sirius says, firmly. His eyes flicker up to look at him. They're a bit glossy. He's beautiful. He's so beautiful.

"Oh," Remus says.

"Quite the opposite of uncomfortable, actually," Sirius says.

"Oh," Remus says.

"So, so far away from uncomfortable."

Remus swallows, and then, "Oh," except it's more of a desperate breath by now.

"It's not—" Sirius starts, struggling for words, grasping for them. "It's not real, it's— we're— it doesn't *mean* anything." It's a breath. An offering. "You're you, and I'm me, and we're not... what we've been pretending. It's not *real*. But— but, every time you kiss me..."

It's a dangerous slope.

"I want to do it again," Remus finishes.

Sirius exhales, and it's so shaky his chest sort of heaves. He squeezes his eyes shut and he bleeds emotion. He's feeling a million things that Remus cannot sort through, but at the top of the pile is their shared hunger, their shared bliss, wish to be everybody and nobody at the same time. The seclusion of their corner of Wales, snowed in; blackout blinds and candlelight and amorosity simmering through their bloodstreams like drugs, the sort of affection that can only be born in hovels and cottages with

choking chimneys and bouncing babies and firelight, dancing on your skin, dancing on his, he's so beautiful.

It's warm, and Devon is so cold. It's a fizz, a bubbly settling of red wine in his blood and the sort of tranquility you can't achieve a million miles from the sand, the feeling of it slipping through your fingers as you drive past borders. It's magic. It's magic, and they both want to indulge in it, and they're only human, and they have a weekend.

"We have a weekend," Remus whispers. Monday the 27th. They have a weekend. "We can be whatever we want."

Acknowledgement and perception seems to fall off of them like a shedding shell, and they can be anyone.

"I want to be yours," says Sirius.

"Be mine, then," says Remus.

Sirius walks the three paces across the room, pads on the wooden floor, oozing gleaming starlight with every footstep as he projects himself into Remus' arms, wraps his arm around his neck and kisses him.

It's golden. It's warmth. It's a drowned wave and a gleaming star, they could be anyone, but they are each other's and he is, he is a dream.

He looks like a dream, when they stagger and he falls down onto the bed and Remus climbs between his legs, kissing him into the mattress like he wants him to make his mark, carve his name, melt into it eternally. He tastes like one, cherry carmine and pine needles and spilled coffee on his tongue. Cleaning it up with wet open-mouthed kisses down his neck, hands over his chest, up and all over him like overgrown ivy. Magnificent and breathless and perhaps more exquisite on stolen time, red around his peripheral vision, red stained fingertips. His touch bleeding into Remus' mouth and flapping through his body like Sirius' shirt in the wind, like his hair fluffed against the pillow, throat open and bobbing and *mine*, his. A kiss and a line down from his sternum to his navel. It's erratic and he's beautiful. He's a forest fire, a hurricane, an avalanche, he's—

He's all of these things, but primarily, he is Remus's. For the night, he is Remus's.

He's Remus's, wrists under his hands, skin in his mouth and between his teeth, every sound that falls out of his mouth like a trickle of sticky chardonnay following a sharp jawline, he's all of these things. He's a billion things. He's a billion noises. He's a sacrifice to be made. The ringing in your ears as the cannons blow red chalk over the overcast sky, a goodbye and a goodnight as Christmas settles and the dust falls and Remus' mud-stained truck tires roll onto English ground, but there is not here. Here is a dreamland. Transcendence. Romanticism. Remus can romanticise his life from now on and it will never get any more idyllic than this. Metaphysicality in each and every one of Remus' back muscles, settled over him like a blanket. Sirius' gentle hands gripping onto something that has never been much of anything before he reached for it.

He has to let go of Sirius for .1 seconds to nip over to his bag, for what he never really takes out, forgets to, in all honesty, *thank the fucking gods and deities that he didn't*, and is over him again, kissing him and stroking him and hiking his legs over his shoulders, his legs are his, hands gripping his thighs. Hands making quick work of erogenous areas that leave him shuddering, and when Remus slides himself in Sirius says his name and he's quite sure that one lone cry will ring around his subconscious like a boomerang, hitting the walls and ringing bells and uprooting landmarks like nothing; that's what Sirius does, that's what he's doing.

He's making obscene noises and fluttering every butterfly within a ten mile area, and Remus hears someone come upstairs and puts a sloppy hand over Sirius' open mouth, lips to his palm and he could memorise them by touch alone, by the way his breath soaks into his bloodstream with every movement. Doors in the hallway open and close and a clandestine tent falls over the two of them as Sirius loses control when Remus touches him, mouth open but silent. It's illicit and it's gorgeous.

Every inch of his trembling soul is held deep in the palm of Remus' hand from where he deposited it there, breathing his last breath against his wrinkled skin, and Remus thinks he'll keep it for a while.

Sirius kisses his palm when he's laid next to him, eyes fluttering shut, lips moving slowly like they're detached from his body. And they could be anything, but they're each others, and for tonight that's all that matters to Remus as he shimmys the duvet out from under them and then drapes it over, turning off the lamp and holding him close in the darkness.

## vii

They don't talk about what they're supposed to be anymore.

Remus is not the instigator of the impasse. He wakes up to Sirius in his arms. His hair is fanned out, scratching an itch on his neck Remus hadn't realised was there; his lips are open and his hand is splayed, searching, resting over his nipple like a trademark.

He wakes up first but he's not alone for long, because at 8am on Christmas Eve Sirius Black wakes up and he does not speak but he kisses him, and somehow that is simultaneously both a million words and none at all. The metaphorical and the tangible. What's real is nothing, each second as they come. Sirius kisses him and he takes it as it comes.

It's all morning breath, tang and grit and blood and bone, something ephemeral in the morning light that is not much of anything, clouded by the ice that they're treading on like eggshells but Remus is content with uncertainty if it has Sirius sighing in his arms; rolled, but more accurately pushed, over, into the mass of pillows - so many he's almost sinking into them - legs spread and a tunnel under the duvet that leaves Sirius biting on his own hand to stop the vocalisations of him and Remus both, whose mouth is a bit preoccupied.

He doesn't entirely succeed. He pushes the duvet down so that his abdomen is tickled with the cold air and the fabric is bundled around Remus' head like a puffer coat, and his lips are slick and his face is flushed and Remus spits on his hand.

"Oh, fuck," he breathes, seemingly torn between looking down through his eyelashes and letting his head fall, "oh, *fuck*, fucking hell, oh my God—"

"Not quite."

"Jesus fucking Christ—"

"Warmer."

“*Remus*,” he chokes; the man in question smiles.

“There we go.”

It’s slick and it’s private and it’s clandestine, a little corner of Wales that is behind lock and key, that is theirs, and it’s sex. Lovely and carnal, raw fingertips and shared breathing, a part of your dastardly soul seeping down someone else’s throat. They’re fitting the mold. They were expected to kiss, and Sirius wanted to kiss him, and Remus wanted to kiss him back and so they’re kissing. Remus doesn’t expect more. He expected a hideaway and he has a fucking sanctuary, he holds it in his dying palm.

And perhaps they were always going to end up here, anyway. The bridge between what they were and what they are lies thin between such concepts of like and dislike, hate and love; they have too much passion clattering through their bones to be something simple, something defined. They’re an array of edges that don’t match and angles that are obtuse on an acute slide, and they’re a ball of pride and a leaky tap of renounced prejudicial feeling, golden and shimmering, rushing up his throat and utterly choking.

They’re two people who want to be everything and simultaneously nothing, and they have come together in the knowledge that they can be *something*, here, under the Welsh skies, and not have to define this something into boxes that it will leak red raw out of; scream and writhe and scratch at cell walls until it is left to float in abandonment; they float above the masses. That’s what they’re doing. Floating. Remus is light on his feet; he’s a hawk, a sleigh, he’s not coming down.

Better to leave this as it is instead of grasping the everything and having to deal with the intense, jaw-locking comedown that would be the crash into the nothing.

So, instead, they make pancakes.

Hope goes out, for the morning, on a long walk with Carol who has apparently had an earth-shattering row with her husband and requires Cupid Lupin to assist and pull off a Christmas miracle in the form of couples therapy, and so she leaves eggs and flour out and asks that they save her a

few. Remus pads downstairs, followed by Sirius, Fizzy and Poppy, in his briefs and dressing gown and bunny slippers while Sirius is wearing Remus' hoodie, joggers and mismatching red and green fluffy Christmas socks. Remus lets Sirius crack the eggs and they take turns mixing the batter until it is smooth enough to suffice for a pancake, and the first time Sirius flips one it simply folds over, like a Calzone.

“Come here, if you just flip it the other way,” Remus says, reaching out with his spatula to try and flip the pancake so the unbaked side is down; Sirius swats him away. “Come on.”

“No, I’m flipping it,” Sirius says, adamant, and Remus laughs.

“It’s going to become an omelette.”

“It’s not, I’m so good at flipping, I swear—”

“You’re *so good at flipping*, so why is there a Calzone where my pancake is supposed to be?”

Sirius narrows his eyes and sort of sifts the pan around. The pancake does a little dance, but does not flip. “Trust the process,” he says.

“There *is* no process! You’re burning the bottom!”

“Let me—” Sirius tries, but he’s laughing through his words, unable to get them out as he jerks the pan up, and again, and it ends up Calzone’d on the other side.

“Give me that—”

“*No!*”

Remus reaches out for the pan and Sirius squirms, flailing, into the corner of the counters which is where Remus makes contact with the sides of his torso, gripping them playfully, except perhaps it’s a bit too playful; Sirius shrieks. He spasms like Lily does when you touch her neck and turns and, in the process, jerks the pan so aggressively he lobbs the half-made pancake across the room and it hits the far wall, sliding down slowly and comically.



They both freeze, watching the pancake slide. Remus' hands are splayed on his hips and Sirius' hand is firm on his chest from where it was pushing him away. The pan is in his other hand.

Fizzy jumps up to catch the pancake, and they burst out laughing. And then they kiss until the smoke alarm goes off from the open gas flame that Sirius has left on in favour of the taste of Remus' neck between his teeth.

They somehow make enough pancakes to share and leave for the Lupin parents. Remus positions himself flush behind him and puts his hand over Sirius' own, gripping the handle of the pan, and teaches him how to flip them properly, no Calzone or omelette treatment.

Sirius leans his head back onto Remus' shoulder. He kisses his cheek. The smoke alarm goes off again.

It's an hour and a half later when Hope gets back, harried and wind-swept and bundled up in about five jackets and three scarves that she detangles herself from as she enters the living room.

Sirius is asleep on Remus' lap.

He hadn't *intended* to fall asleep - in fact, he had actually told Remus specifically to wake him up if he fell asleep - but Remus had seen the bags under his eyes and had known that he had probably needed it, just a little nap, and so by the time Hope bustles in the TV has been muted for half an hour and Remus has been idly reading *A Tale of Two Cities* again, Sirius breathing regularly. He hasn't the heart to wake him up. Hope gets a few words in before Remus is looking at her, finger pressed to his lips with one hand and the other in Sirius' hair, kneading. She gapes and then she smiles, and de-robes her outer garments silently.

She sits on the other sofa and scrolls idly on her phone. It's fifteen minutes later that their tranquility is cracked when Sirius stirs, and then he wakes.

"Morning," Remus smiles as he turns on his lap. Sirius' face goes from soft to perceptive; his eyes go from clouded with sleep to dark with recognition.

Remus runs a hand through his hair as his face gets more and more deep in a frown.

“You said you’d wake me up,” he says, accusatory and petulant.

“You were tired,” Remus replies. “It was only an hour.”

Sirius huffs and crosses his arms. “An hour too long,” he says, rubbing the balls of his palms into his eyes aggressively. He drops them and lets the right one fall, drooping over the edge of the sofa. “I need to get up.”

“You can get up.”

“Your hand is in my hair.”

Remus pulls it out immediately. Sirius bites on the corner of his lip, and then reaches over and puts it back.

“Five minutes,” he says firmly, closing his eyes as Remus kneads through his curls again. He smiles into his book.

“Of course,” Remus murmurs, smile in his voice, and they carry on, regulated breathing and one-handed page turning until about fifteen minutes later, when Sirius’ eyes creak open and he takes a long, heaving sigh.

Remus moves his hand, for his benefit, because he knows Sirius won’t move without it. He sends him a daggered glare, but acquiesces and sits up.

He yawns, and rubs at his eyes once more. Turns around, bleary-eyed, and lays his gaze onto Hope.

“Oh,” he says. “Morning, Hope.”

“Morning, love,” she says, smiling warmly.

“Did you like your pancakes?”

“I did,” she says, nodding. “Thank you for them.”

Remus says “Don’t thank *him*,” at the same time Sirius says, very primly, “You’re welcome,” and they glare at each other.

“I’m missing some context, here,” Hope says.

“He can’t flip the pancakes,” Remus tells her, looking down through his eyelashes and Sirius gasps, whacks him one.

“I so *can*.”

“Babe—” Remus says, and then he stops. Mouth still half open, somewhat in shock; he’s not sure where it came from.

Sirius’ face flickers for a brief, brief moment, and then he purses his mouth. As if nothing ever happened. He’s good. “Yes?” he says, expectantly, putting his hand on his hips.

Remus’ mouth contorts into a smile.

“Nothing,” Remus says, returning to his book, still smiling.

There’s a scratch at the door, and a whine.

“That’ll be your best friend,” he says, nodding a head to the door, where Fizzy has made herself present and impatient. “Go entertain her.”

Sirius looks at him and then moves his hand, discreetly where Hope can’t see, to rest over Remus’ free hand, lying idly in his lap. He turns it over, gently, and links their fingers together. Remus squeezes.

He simply stares for a moment. And then he pulls Remus’ hand up, kisses it harshly and drops it, up and out of the door in an instant.

Remus blinks at the door. He feels slightly dazed. He doesn’t realise there’s a smile on his lips until he turns and his mother is smirking at him.

“Oh, what?” he says. He hears Sirius walking up the stairs, and then Fizzy padding after him. Hope laughs.

“Nothing,” she says, shaking her head. She looks away, and then looks back at Remus when his gaze does not abate. She sighs. “You look happy.”

His face softens.

“I do?” he asks. She nods.

“I don’t remember the last time I saw you this happy,” she murmurs, smile fading into something more nostalgic, more nurturing. It makes Remus’ stomach flip. “It’s always schoolwork stress or money stress or stress around those elitist fuckers you surround yourself with at that school.”

“I don’t *surround* myself with them,” Remus mumbles through numb lips, “I’m contractually obliged to tolerate and cooperate with them in the workplace.”

“Whatever,” she says, flourishing a hand. “It’s still a miserable little place, and it weighs down on you, love. So much so that when you’re light you look like a completely different person.”

Remus isn’t very sure of how to reply to this.

“He makes you happy,” she says, gentle, it’s all so fucking *gentle*, his insides and the out, “and that’s all I can ask for. As a mother. For someone to love my baby as much as I do.”

“Mam,” Remus groans, letting his spinning head fall into his hands. She laughs.

“Sorry,” she says, “I don’t know if yous are there yet. But I see how he looks at you.”

Remus looks up. Licks his lips. His mouth is dry.

“How does he look at me?” he asks.

She shrugs. “Like he wants to smack you silly and then snog you into next Sunday.”

“*Ma-am*,” Remus groans again, laughing through it, head back in his hands, where he belongs, where his heart is pounding into his ears at the looks that he hasn’t been seeing.

“‘S how your father looks at me,” she says, shrugging. “And he’s a great big oaf sometimes, but I love him, still.”

Remus opens his hands, resting them on his cheeks so he can look at her. She’s got a big earnest smile on and so much love in her eyes Remus wants to hold onto her like he’s a child again and forget about all of the strange feelings he’s feeling, *more, more, more, danger*.

And Remus thinks things are a bit more nuanced than hate and love. He’s not entirely sure he’s ever experienced both. If you’d asked him a week ago, perhaps the answer would be different. Perhaps love would be in his early adolescent boyfriends and hate would be in every tongue bleeding onto his sunken form in Devon. But now, now... he’s not so sure. He thought he hated everybody but he’s beginning to think the power of it is just not worth his time. He thought he hated Sirius and was proven catastrophically wrong. There are probably a million things he’s got wrong. There are probably a million things he’ll continue to get wrong, but he thinks... he thinks he’s okay with that.

He’s thinking this when he opens the door to his bedroom, ten minutes later, and Sirius is there in joggers and a hoodie, his hoodie, again - his hair wet and pulled to the back of his head, his scent floral and clean and refreshing and light. He’s thinking about love and he’s thinking about hate. He’s thinking about the internal whirlpool that his mother’s words have planted in his gut, the detrimental realisation that he’s yet to have (he’ll have it soon) and playing through memory upon memory of looks, trying to place *that* look, the *one*, the one that has people reeling with heartbreak and bathing in bliss, and he finds it.

When Sirius turns around to him, towel in his hands, drowning in his hoodie, he finds it. In the way that his lids twitch and his cheeks soften and his mouth relaxes, bottom lip full, a muscle quirking up at the lips that makes Remus stop thinking altogether.

He's not thinking. They have the weekend to hide away, and they're talking a million words and none at all and thinking a million thoughts and none at all, but Sirius' tongue is in his mouth, and it's worth billions.

He makes all of the thoughts stop. It's what Remus needs this Christmas.

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They end up baking.

It's a fucking disaster. Hope and Lyall are both out - Lyall at work, choosing to work Christmas Eve as opposed to Boxing Day, Hope out for Christmas Eve lunch with her friends (minus Carol who is hauling ass to Bristol Airport to try to catch her husband before he goes back to Germany - a drama Remus is very glad to not be a part of). Dorcas and Marlene are having a day out in Saundersfoot, Jenny is catching up with friends in Cardiff, and Remus has not had one mince pie all Christmas season.

"I have not had one mince pie all Christmas season," he says, voicing this thought, at about 1pm. Lying in bed with Sirius on his chest walking two fingers up and down the collarbone his lips had been pressed to as if trying to drink out of it not two hours before.

They napped, again, afterwards. It's just one of those days. Now it's 1pm on Christmas Eve and half the day is gone and Remus has not had one mince pie. Not one.

Sirius pushes himself up, arms folded on Remus' chest, to look at him.

"We could make mince pies?" he offers, and Remus' eyes twinkle.

Forty-five minutes later they're in Asda.

Remus' truck was iced to the max, so he had to let it run for fifteen minutes and use the scraper to get it all off, but it's okay because running it for fifteen minutes meant that by the time they got in the heating was thorough and intense, and thus their toes were toasty warm. (Sirius expressed this

sentiment happily. Cold toes are, in his opinion, the fall of mankind; Remus is endeared to his dramatics.)

He grabs a trolley, which is already a red flag because, realistically, they only need mincemeat, tangerines, flour and icing sugar, but Remus ignores it and ten minutes there is an array of bullshit in their trolley including microwave popcorn, a box of meringue nests and three advent calendars. The last three.

“Why do we need advent calendars?” Remus asks, chuckling slightly and pulling one out of the trolley that he’s walking idly alongside as Sirius pushes it. They’re Cadbury’s, and it’s literally December 24th.

“Have you never binged an advent calendar all in one?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“No? I eat them the way you’re supposed to.”

Sirius stops. A lady almost bumps into him, and she gives him evils as she passes, but he doesn’t seem to notice. He simply looks, faux-pitifully at Remus, and reaches over to tap the side of his face as patronisingly as humanly possible.

“Oh, you poor, sheltered thing,” he says, wistfully, and Remus scoffs and swats his hand away, evoking a musical laugh that makes the jars on the shelf shudder and shake like the lining of Remus’ stomach, perched on by butterflies.

“Also, we never had them growing up,” he says, continuing walking, and Remus raises an eyebrow. “Not because we didn’t celebrate Christmas or anything. Just because my mother hates happiness. So every year when it gets to late in the month and I know that anyone who wants one has one I buy a couple to gorge on, out of complete spite.”

Remus exhales slowly, reaching over to pick out a six pack of eggs, because he can’t remember if they have any left after the pancake fiesta of the morn. “No offence, but your mother sounds like a bitch.”

“Full offense, she is,” Sirius says, laughing. “She’s a narcissist. And a right-wing homophobe. Motherly validation was so far and few when I was a kid that I just stopped trying, and I was all the better for it.”

Remus nods, as Sirius examines a bag of flour, turning it over to look at the back. He leans against the shelf and watches.

“I’m proud of you,” he says, quietly.

Sirius turns to him. He takes a deep breath, in through his nose and out through his mouth, and then nods.

“I’m proud of me, too,” he replies, fully formed, unbroken and healed, a knight and a centrepiece. Remus wants to unwork him and swallow his soul whole.

He doesn’t know what to reply, however. So he leans over and kisses him on the cheek.

Sirius’ whole entire face goes red and he throws the flour into the trolley without a second look.

Things are okay, at first. They end up buying cake mix as well as ingredients for mince pies, but the mince pies are the priority, and Remus lets Sirius crack the eggs because he finds stupid wonder in doing it and they heave all of the pastry ingredients into one bowl and wash their hands to mix them.

“It says to do it with your fingers,” Remus says, holding it in front of Sirius, who has rolled his sleeves up, prepared. They’re both wearing matching blue and red striped aprons that Remus found in the cupboard. Sirius wiggles his fingers.

“That’s what she said,” he quips, and Remus rolls his eyes and resists throwing the flour all over him. Sirius goes in.

He mixes the ingredients well for about a minute, and then pulls a flour-covered hand out to wipe at his forehead, and on the journey up there he



laughs at something Remus says and blows violent air onto his fingers and thus, the flour goes flying.

It splatters across Remus' face like a thin coating of dust. He opens his eyes and he can see it on his eyelashes. Sirius' mouth is wide open.

"I am," he says, trying to keep composure, "so sorry," but he can't do it, and he bursts out laughing so Remus puts the bowl on the side, reaches a hand in and coats his own hand in flour-y egg-y juices and goes for him. Sirius is shrieking and laughing and backs himself into a corner where Remus wipes his four fingers aggressively on his cheeks through bouts of giggles, and Sirius thins his lips and squeezes his eyes shut and takes it, chest heaving with unabated laughter.

He puts his own hands up in self-defence and gets it in Remus' hair, which he knows immediately is a mistake if the terror in his eyes is anything to go for, and Remus just looks at him. For a second. Sirius is fighting a laugh so hard he's about to explode.

Everything seems to happen at once, and by everything, it is Remus practically jumping across the kitchen to get to the discarded bowl while Sirius tries to leg it for the door. He catches him before he can get there and blows flour all over his hair, on the side of his face, sticking to the juice that was already there.

Fizzy runs in and starts barking, and some of the flour lands on her, too. She looks like she has dandruff. Sirius, on the other hand, looks like a toddler who has managed to bypass the child locks and found himself taut fist deep in a bag of flour.

Remus bursts out laughing. It's stupid and domestic and comedic and they're a mess.

"Now we don't have the right balance of flour," Sirius complains, when they get back to mixing the dough for the pastry, but Remus shrugs and says it doesn't matter, he didn't pull that much out.

(Sirius still adds a bit more when he thinks he's not looking.)

Post-flour war disasters include:

Sirius, scraping his wrist on the hand grater when they grate the zest from the tangerines, and then, in his utter agony, accidentally dropping half of one of them. Fizzy eats it so swiftly Remus doesn't even see it on the floor.

Remus, washing the flour off of his face when the mincemeat is blended and the pastry is being rolled out, only for Sirius to stick his finger in the bag, coat his lips with flour and pepper kisses and handprints to his cheeks, leaving him just as disheveled as before.

Sirius, knocking the muffin tray face-down onto the floor when they're halfway through fitting the pastry into the muffin cups. With his arse.

Remus, once the mince pies are in the oven, having a brainfart moment and accidentally putting a spoonful of flour into his tea instead of a spoonful of sugar. In his defence, they're *right next* to each other and he hasn't got his glasses on, but Sirius won't hear a word of it. He laughs so hard that Fizzy begins to bark manically, thinking something is wrong, and then he dares Remus to take a sip, which he does. It does not taste good.

Sirius, hauled up onto the counter, Remus between his legs kissing him within an inch of his life. (This disaster, while lovely, leads them to forget about the mince pies for about an extra five minutes, and so they come out rather dark and crisp-looking.)

It doesn't matter. Remus is covered in flour and he has mincemeat in his hair from when Sirius touched it forgetting that he still had the residue on his hands, and Sirius' black hair has white strands in it and there's the imprint of Remus' hand on his bum in white as he leans over to take them out of the oven, but they are mince pies. They have made mince pies. They're not perfect - they're a bit manky-looking, actually - but Sirius dusts icing sugar on it like some sort of professional chef and they arrange them prettily on a pink plate from deep in the cupboard, and cheers their first ones before eating them.

Taste-wise, they're good. They're really fucking good.

“Do you know what this means?” Sirius asks, when he’s halfway through his and Remus has finished his, licked his fingers and moaned about how good they were the whole way through.

“We should go on the Bake Off?”

“I—” Sirius cuts off, spluttering with surprised laughter, “well, yes, but also that we need to bake that cake.”

Remus had, admittedly, forgotten about the chocolate cake mix that they had bought. His eyes flicker over to the Asda bag thrown onto the rocking chair, and then back to Sirius, who’s taking another bite.

“Eat quicker,” he says, and Sirius lights up.

The chocolate cake proves to be easier, due to the fact that it’s a mix, so it’s quite straightforward. They mix eggs, vegetable oil, water and the mix contained in a bowl with an electric whisk that Remus pulls out of the rusty old back of a cupboard. It does the job.

Sirius holds the bowl in one arm like a baby and his hand vibrates as he mixes it all together into one big chocolatey goop, lips thin with precision, and Remus doesn’t want this to end.

It hits him all very abruptly. He doesn’t want this to end. Sirius stops the mixer, looks up at Remus - who pretends to be looking away, reading the instructions - and then dips his finger in and tries the mix, and Hope was right, he’s so happy, he’s never been more weightless, he doesn’t want this to end.

He doesn’t want any of it to end - not just the week, the moment, Sirius’ excitement at how nice the mix is and the way the bowl clatters on the surface as he opens three drawers in search of the cutlery. The way he smiles as he achieves a small spoon and scoops a tiny bit of the mixture on the end of it, and reaches it out for Remus to try. The earnest look in his eyes and the way he bites down on his bottom lip as Remus opens his mouth, as cocoa flourishes his mouth with her intoxicins and Sirius flushes his bloodstream with his smile, and he can’t do anything to shatter that

smile, so he smiles back. Nods, says something about how good it is. Dreads turning back to the clock, ticking down on their borrowed time.

Because things will be different in Devon. He's scared of it, honestly. Going back to Wales has always been a reprieve for him, going back home, to the people who know him the most, the nuances and the intricacies of his character all the way back to the foundations of his youth. You don't find that in a stranger's palace, but you can find it with a stranger in your own. But if he enters Sirius', that fucking balcony and that fucking bathroom, things will be different. They'll be back on Earth, the real world, the pavement and the grit and the monotony instead of up in paradise, and Remus wants to stay here a while. He's already going to crash and burn going back. He hadn't realised how much home was taking from him until he *actually* went home. His real home. Whatever and whomever that may include.

It wasn't end of term blues. It was, he fears, disillusion.

And he has his illusion, here, with Sirius. Pouring the cake batter into the little circular tins and putting them in. Watching as he takes charge in making the buttercream. Melted chocolate and butter and sugar sweet. It's a mirage. It's a hallucination. It's fake, *fake fake fake*, and yet this is the realest thing Remus thinks he's ever felt.

He doesn't want it to end, ever, so once the buttercream is ready and the cake is rising in the oven he takes Sirius in his arms and holds him, revelling in the way he squeezes his waist and digs his face into his neck. The way he fits perfectly, as if he was supposed to be there all along. As if the past two years have been paramnesia and this is their lovely endgame.

He pulls back, and Sirius gives him the look.

Remus is quite sure that he returns it.

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The rest of the day goes swiftly. They take Fizzy on a brief walk around the nature trail behind the cul-de-sac, Sirius wrapped up in his coat and one of

Remus' scarves, inhaling his scent as they walk hand in hand. Remus always loved it down there, when he was younger, because there is a field through the tree line that is surrounded by a river, rushing water, enough to pop your ears and there is a bench where he can sit if things are too strenuous positioned right at the loveliest position at the top of a slope in which he can watch Fizzy pelt across the grass and, at the same time, admire the sun as it sets in the west projected over the voluminous waters.

They sit here. Sirius snuffles with the cold - Remus is coming to learn this is a thing that always happens, worse than most people, his nose gets red and he snuffles and he finds it hopelessly endearing - and sits beside him. Grapples with his hand. He rests his head on his shoulder and Remus shuffles sideways to accommodate him as Fizzy barks and dashes through the crisp snow from where it clung onto the secluded grass of the field last night, and the sunset is nothing exciting, but they watch it.

It's overcast. The sky is light and then it is dark. There's no transparency, no diversity in its existence. It's black and white as the brightness is turned down all around them except for one moment, as Fizzy pads up to them and curls as their feet, when the clouds part for a brief glimpse into what could be. They tumble into each other, grey on grey on purplish-black and there's a splash of orange, soaked into the cotton candy consistency like a drop of watercolour from a paintbrush that was not supposed to be hovering. Like an intrusion, or, perhaps, like a release. A dream. Highlighting his face in glorious red, orange, multicolour luminescence and then taking it away almost as soon as it was there, and Sirius drops his hand.

He sits up, breathing viscerally in front of them, and they look at each other. Sirius offers him a smile that doesn't meet his eyes and Remus leans forward to kiss him, ice cold lips to ice cold lips; warmth of the sun just out of reach as the clouds swirl back into grey and they are opaque once more.

"I bet that sunset is beautiful in summer," Sirius murmurs, as they're getting up to walk away. Remus is facing away from it to walk home, but Sirius turns back for one last look. It's more of an abyss than it is a sunset, now, but Remus turns to look with him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

He takes a deep breath.

“It is,” he says, and it comes out sad. It comes out fleeting. He wraps an arm around Sirius and pulls, gently, and he goes with him as smooth as an outreaching wave retreats back into the cold, icy waters.

Christmas traditions are far and few as one gets older, but Hope Lupin has the spirit of a joyous child and bleeds happiness into the small, woody kitchen, lighting candles and incense, and they have a lovely dinner. Toad in the hole. Remus discovers that Sirius is a gravy fiend and Sirius discovers that Remus can eat a whale and stay hungry, getting seconds then thirds, and they laugh and exchange firelight secrets. It’s how Lyall’s mother used to hide stockings around the house and make them find them, how Julia and Hope used to wake up on Christmas morning every hour from four to six to eight until their mother got up, not letting up until they were even in their late teens. Remus talks about that one time they got snowed in and Jenny, seven years old, had cried thinking that they’d never get out again. Sirius beams and they talk to him and he talks back as if he’s part of the family. As if he had been under the bed with Lyall’s stocking, the clock ticking down to Julia and Hope’s excitement, the snow stuck to the doors when Remus’ grandfather had tried to open it. It makes Remus happy and it makes him sad, because he could be. He sees him there so clearly its visual.

Perhaps that’s what has endeared him to Sirius so. The fact that he loves Remus’ family and the fact that his family loves him. It’s like a game of happy fucking families, playing pretend, mummies and daddies. The bridge between real and fake gapped with the outpour of golden flush that Remus is encompassed by when Sirius grapples for his hand under the table. The cracks in it when Hope mentions the future and his face falters, slightly, his hand loses its grip.

Remus should say something. He should probably say something. He feels like there have been a million opportunities to say something and they’ve all been lost in Sirius’ eyes, in his happiness.

He doesn’t. They end up in bed, Christmas Eve night, entangled and doped up and raw, lips and cheeks and eyelashes fluttering with the wind knocking on Remus’ window panes, and Sirius cups his face and tells him that he had the most amazing day.

“Yeah?”

“Mhm,” he murmurs, brushing hair off of his forehead and kissing his nose. “I really did.”

“I did too,” Remus says, reaching a hand up to tuck Sirius’ hair behind his ear. It’s painfully domestic.

And Sirius’ face does that thing that it’s been doing all evening. He smiles, and then his face falters and a line appears between his brow for a split second. He shakes it off and leans back in to kiss him, and Remus stops him. Sirius blinks, confused.

“Are you alright?” he asks, a mumble in the darkness, and he halts.

They lie there, holding each other, two hands on cheeks and two hands in chests and all Remus thinks is, *No. Say no. Say something to shatter me because I can’t bear to shatter you. Tell me this isn’t real before we go too far. Tell me this whole affair is a selfish indulgence. Tell me all your looks are pretend. Tell me something. Tell me anything.*

Sirius breathes in, and then he smiles. Nods his head.

“Never been better,” he whispers, and then he leans in again. And when he kisses Remus it’s fatalistic. It’s laced with some drug that makes them unable to draw apart until they’re gasping, lungs bursting against the beat of their heart, the clock on the wall, running out of time.

The second hand ticks and all three of them align, and when it hits midnight on Christmas Day Sirius is breathing ritually on his chest, hands still intertwined, and they’re running out of time.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Remus can't seem to recall what a typical Christmas morning should be like.

He should wake up alone in his bed. He doesn't. He should be prepared to be woken by his parents, earlier risers than him, and he isn't. He should expect presents from his family, a few more brought round later in the day by Dorcas on behalf of her entire family and whatever James and Lily shoved into the boot of his car before he left, and it's not what happens, because Sirius has somehow weaseled his way into Remus' forlorn little life and everything is different. Everything is brighter.

He sees it, Christmas morning, waking up to his smiling face against the gentle glow of the morning sun. He could capture this moment and lock it in his heart and it would never be enough; never match up to the grit in Sirius' morning voice and the slide of leg against leg as he leans forward, excited, emphatic, endearing.

"Morning," Remus breathes, through laughter as Sirius snuggles into his chest. He can feel the movements of him jiggling his toes with excitement. His toes. What a strange little creature. "Merry Christmas. Someone's a bit excited."

"Always loved Christmas," comes the reply, along with a cold pointer finger tracing the ridge of his collarbone. "Never had a good one until James, but loved it nonetheless."

"Your *lovely* mum didn't celebrate the happiness of Christmas?" Remus asks, sarcastically. "I'm shocked."

Sirius breathes sharply out of his nose in laughter.



“Nope. I liked my family getting together, because they’d all get rat-arsed by 3pm and I’d be able to sneak Regulus, Andy and Alphard away and– I don’t know, play Monopoly up in a storage cupboard until my mum found us.”

Remus hums. “Was it more religious focused?”

“Nah, not that, either,” Sirius says, and Remus marvels about how much he’s pulling out of him - how much they’re giving to each other. “I mean, she’s Catholic, but I don’t think she ever gave a monkeys about the actual religion. Was mainly so she could suck up to the priest for a letter of recommendation to get me and Reg into this private Catholic school. Which was awful, by the way.”

He takes a breath, and Remus ruffles his hair.

“And then I met James at Uni, and everything changed,” he whispers.

Remus squeezes him, and then lets go, tilting his head. Sirius pushes himself up to rest on his chest so he can see him.

“Well,” he says, playfully, “you’ve never experienced a Lupin Christmas before.”

Sirius smirks, playing along. “Oh? And how do Lupin Christmases go?”

Remus purses his lips.

“Well, first, mam will knock on the door at about nine,” he starts.

(The clock hits 9, and there’s a knock at the door.

“Good morning, boys,” comes the cheery call through the door hinges. “Are we clothed and Christmassy?”

Sirius and Remus look at each other. Remus is shirtless and Sirius is in his underwear and a stolen jumper.

“Hmmehh,” is the noncommittal noise Remus makes, and she deems that good enough to come in. She’s wearing headband antlers and a Christmas jumper that depicts a reindeer with little bells attached to his own antlers. They jangle as she comes in.

“Merry Christmas,” she says, beaming, grabbing onto the fabric of her jumper and jingling the bells emphatically. Sirius laughs and Remus throws a pillow at her and tells her they’ll be down in five minutes.)

“What then?” Sirius asks, and Remus continues;

“Then, we’ll go downstairs and there will either be pancake mix on the floor or on the ceiling. It’s always debatable which it’ll be.”

(When Remus pushes the rickety door to the kitchen open, he’s hit with the smell of them.

His eyes flicker up to the ceiling, and nothing. They flicker down, to the floor, and Fizzy is standing with her head down at the stove licking emphatically on the floor, and he knows.

“There’s two already on the plates, darling,” Hope says to him, pouring the mixture into the pan to make another. Remus points to Fizzy, who is finishing up, and raises his eyebrows at Sirius.

“What did I tell you?” he mumbles, and Sirius laughs, shakes his head fondly and mutters “Jesus Christ” as an expletive, sitting down and reaching for the golden syrup.)

“When are we doing presents?” Sirius asks, in bed, tapping his fingers animatedly, and Remus quirks an eyebrow.

“That’s what you’re most excited for, isn’t it?”

Sirius smiles, sheepish. “Maybe.”

He rolls his eyes. “Dorcas said she’s coming round about eleven with hers, so I presume we’ll do them about then?”

And this is what leads him to 11:03, sitting on the sofa, squashed between Sirius and Marlene as Dorcas passes around all of the presents, even the ones already under the tree. She happens to be the most organised. They just let her do her thing.

Remus' parents open theirs from his first. They consist of a lovely fur coat that Hope had mentioned liking about six months ago and a set of gardening tools, which is all Lyall wanted no matter how much Remus asked. They're both delighted, and then Dorcas finds another present under the tree, to the both of them, from Sirius.

"When did you slip this under there?" Hope teases, undoing the wrapping, and Sirius flushes.

"No, seriously," Remus mutters, frowning, feeling like he's spent every waking moment with Sirius in the past week and unable to place when he could've even done that, "when did you?"

"I have my ways," he mutters back, turning to Remus and winking and then turning back just in time for Hope to pull the wrapping paper entirely off to reveal a Celebrations box, and two matching pairs of gloves.

"It's not much," Sirius says, "I didn't really have any time to— er, *prepare*, me coming was a bit last minute, but—"

Hope gets up, kneels down in front of him and pulls him into a hug. Sirius gapes, for a moment, and then hugs her back. He digs his face into her hair and closes his eyes, and it's lovely.

"Thank you for coming," Hope murmurs, swaying him amicably, and Sirius smiles.

"Thank you for having me," he whispers back, "it's been the most amazing time."

His eyes flicker. He looks at Remus. Remus feels a stab of dread in his abdomen and can't find it in him to smile, so he just stares and hopes that the message is conveyed.

More presents are shared. Lyall gets Dorcas a notebook and she gets him a whoopee cushion, which he delights in. Marlene gets Sirius and Remus a book, each (she gets Remus a gorgeous hardback copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Sirius *The Secret Garden*) along with matching little bobblehead Santas to put on their cars and with a card containing two £20 notes. Dorcas gives Remus what might be the most sentimental present - a little stuffed bear, grey and brown with sweet little button eyes and velvet paw pads. It's a gorgeous replica of a toy they used to play with - his name was Bobby, and he used to jump between house to house until the Meadows moved in and he was lost. It's sentimental and nostalgic and a testament to the truest bond Remus has ever known and he might tear up just a little bit. Just a smidge. Enough for Sirius to make fun of him to hell and back, but he doesn't care.

Remus turns after he's composed himself over this *stupid fucking bear* and Sirius is swivelled towards him, present in his lap. He holds it out.

"You got me a present?" is what Remus blurts, before remembering they're supposed to be dating and people in relationships tend to get each other presents and so he gapes and says, "we said we wouldn't this year," to try and make it sound better. Sirius rolls his eyes.

"I know," he says, playing along, "but I got you this anyway. Sorry. Sue me."

Dorcas laughs and Remus takes the package. It's soft and malleable, like it's a clothing item, but there's something hard rattling around underneath the green Christmas tree paper.

He rips it open, because that is the way you are supposed to open Christmas presents, and his jaw drops. He looks up at Sirius. Dead in the eyes.

"I can't *stand* you," he says, face smooth and unbroken until Sirius bursts into laughter and he gives into his weakness, laughing and pulling the brand new, shiny black hole puncher out of the cushioned fabric it's lying in.

"Now you won't have to steal mine all the time."

“I don’t steal it,” Remus laughs, absurdly, in disbelief over how this moment is real; he sets the hole puncher to the side and pulls out the fabric. There’s two items of clothing.

One of them is a blue version of the sage green crop top that Sirius bought in the vintage store.

“Oh my god,” Remus says.

“Where’s the rest of it?” Lyall grunts, and everyone falls into laughter.

“You were so adamantly against it!” Sirius teases, “I had to prove you wrong. Now I bought it for you so you have to wear it. It’s an obligation.”

Remus rolls his eyes, dramatically, and sets it aside, knowing he’ll do whatever the hell Sirius wants. He pulls out the last item. It’s a thick turtleneck, brown and cotton.

He quirks an eyebrow, and Sirius bites on his bottom lip and shrugs.

“I just thought you’d look good in that one,” he says, and Remus smiles.

He leans forward and kisses him, gently, on the cheek.

“Thank you,” he whispers, and Sirius beams.

“Is that it?” Hope asks, residue of a smile on her face when Remus turns. She’s looking over the wrapping paper remnants on the floor, trying to see if there’s any more.

Remus is about to speak when Dorcas does it for him.

“Mm-mm, there’s one here,” she says, pulling the small wrapped box out from under something it had got hidden by. She reads the small print, smiles, and looks at them both.

“Sirius, from Remus,” she says, and Sirius’ head whips around to him immediately.

“You got—”

“Oh, we’ve already had this conversation,” Remus mutters, and Sirius shuts his mouth. He takes the box from Dorcas and deposits it in his willing hands. “Just open it.”

Sirius begins to open it.

“It’s not much,” Remus murmurs, looking at the turtleneck and suddenly feeling a bit self conscious, “not as much as you got me.”

“Shhhh,” Sirius shakes his head, tearing off the wrapping paper fully and holding the black ring box in his nimble hands. He looks up at Remus, cautiously, and then reaches a hand around the back and opens it.

His eyes soften, and his mouth falls open.

Remus can just see over the ring box lid, as the ring glints against the tree lights. He still thinks it’s incredibly pretty. Little star on top, big star on the bottom. Like a protective barrier. Weaved together with metal, obviously homemade; created with so much feeling he can almost feel it emanating off of Sirius’ skin as he stares at the box.

He closes his mouth, and he doesn’t say anything. Just takes a deep breath and stares. Remus feels, momentarily, a bit of panic.

“It’s—” he coughs, raising a hand to his mouth, “well, I saw it, and I thought of you. Because of the stars. And then there was a big one and a little one, and I thought about how your brother, how fondly you talk of him and so I thought... this could represent you both. Big star and little star... you know?”

“I know,” he whispers. It’s fragile.

Remus opens his mouth to speak, again, but can’t find anything else to say, so he closes it.

Sirius swallows, viscerally, and then he looks up, and there are tears in his eyes.

Remus' stomach plummets. "You don't like it."

"No, you great oaf, I love it," Sirius gasps, wiping his face and shuffling forward to pull Remus into a hug with his free arm, the other holding the ring out as if it's something to be put on display. "God, I can't tell you how much I love it."

Remus holds him back, and squeezes, gently. When he pulls back Sirius wipes his face with his sleeve, sniffs, and takes the ring out of the box. It fits onto his middle finger like it was made to be there.

He takes a deep breath, and looks at it, resting in his lap. And then he looks up at Remus and his face shifts into something indecipherable.

His mouth is slightly parted and there's a crease between his brows, but nothing speaks to him, this isn't a look he shares a language with. Remus hadn't realised how easy it had gotten to read him until he had closed up again; until he'd code-switched into something that reminds him of nothing but the end, nothing but the short time that they've been each others and nothing but the years of scaffolding beforehand, a *what the hell are we doing?* type of doom settled into his gut.

It sends a sort of fatalistic shiver down his spine, and Sirius gapes for a moment.

He's trying to find words to say, he's trying so hard, but all that comes out is a feeble, "Oh," as if he's just realised something detrimental and it is savagely eating its way through his brain to knock down the brainwave walls that are so desperately trying to keep it out. It has just grabbed a hand around a wheel that it should not have control of, and Sirius takes a deep breath and his face relaxes so abruptly it's almost terrifying, it's practiced, it's reserved.

Remus doesn't get to say anything before Hope is getting up, oblivious, and they fall into idle conversation, the group as they all get up, intent on returning to the kitchen for a cup of tea. Remus walks, expecting Sirius to be behind him, but he slips away.

He's gone for ten minutes before Remus gets worried, and so he goes upstairs.

He opens the door, and Sirius is zipping up a suitcase.

"What are you doing?" he asks, bewildered, and Sirius turns to him, surprised. He doesn't have the ring on and his eyes are gently red-rimmed.

"I'm leaving," he says, resolutely, pulling at the zip some more. Remus shuts the door behind him and gapes, unsure of what to say.

"You're *what*?"

"Leaving," Sirius says, sniffing. Heading to the bedside and unplugging his phone, shoving a book he had been pretending to read in a tote bag. The weather is calm outside, tame and amiable against the harsh winter; it's almost as if Sirius has absorbed it like a sponge to water, icy cold. He's a million things, he's a whirlwind in Remus' warm, icy watered bedroom and he walks up to him and grabs him by the shoulder, close when he swivels around.

"Why?" Remus whispers, and Sirius looks like he might crumble, fall apart.

"We're not fucking *together*, Remus," he spits, pushing past him, pulling the suitcase up and placing his tote bag on top of it. "We're not— this isn't *real*. None of this is *real*."

Remus doesn't know what to say to that, but he feels like he *should*, like he can't lose grip of him now and so he says "Does it have to be?"

Sirius laughs bitterly. It is the wrong thing to say. Remus wants to take the words back immediately but he can't, not when they've struck themselves into him already, a hurt he can see, one he's acquainted with.

"How can you *live* with yourself knowing you walk around in a fantasy?" Sirius asks, and it's harsh but the tone of his voice is soft, like a disguise. It begins to raise. "I *can't*, anymore. I'm sorry. I tried my best. You can tell



your mum that I— that I fell ill, or something, had to go home. I just have to go home. I just have to be on my own.”

“The whole point of you coming here was that you weren’t on your own at Christmas,” Remus says, stepping forward.

“No, the whole point of me coming here was to fucking *pretend* to be in love with *you!*” Sirius yells, and then squeezes his eyes shut and presses both his hands to his face, taking three, sharp breaths before dropping them, and he is poised again. “This arrangement didn’t benefit me at all, not really. It did the fucking opposite. This was— this was all for *you*. It was horrible for me and I can’t— it’s making me sick—”

“That’s not what you said last night,” Remus murmurs, numb. “That’s not what you... you said...”

Sirius’ bottom lip trembles. He takes it raw between his teeth to hide, but Remus sees.

“It was *fake*,” he whispers, broken, entirely broken. He’s shaking his head. “I *can’t* be yours. I can’t be yours if you...” trails off, shaking his head, “I just have to go, Remus. Please. Please let me go.”

Remus stares at him. Watches as a lock of his hair flounces from out of the hold it’s in, tucked behind his ear. He wants to tuck it back. God, he wants to tuck him back into bed and pretend this never happened.

A tear rolls down his cheek. He’s so lovely. He’s looking at Remus and he’s never seen that look before. It’s not his look. It’s not his. Remus has been setting himself up for failure by letting himself dance in front of the firelight instead of dodging the jumping embers. It’s like touching coals and then questioning why your skin is burnt. It’s like a bite of forbidden fruit and the way it skins your throat like razors when it comes back up.

Sirius wasn’t his to let go, that’s the fact of it all. He isn’t his to lose, never fucking was, so why does it feel like a piece of Remus’ soul is going with him?

“Stay for dinner,” Remus croaks. “Please. Mam’s made too much food for us all to eat and Jenny will want to see you before you go and– and, I think my dad,” his voice breaks and he squeezes his eyes shut, feeling them prickle under his eyelids, “I think he’s got a new crossword that he wants you to help with, and there are those roasties that I see you eating all the time in the canteen at school–”

“*Remus,*” Sirius whispers, sadly.

“I can drive you home after four,” Remus says. “Or see you off. I can do that, I will do that, just stay for dinner. Please.”

Sirius looks at him, stray tear tracking icicles down his cheek, and after a moment his shoulders slump. He drops the tote bag onto the top of the suitcase, properly, and nods.

“Okay,” he breathes, dropping his gaze and looking everywhere but at him.

“Okay,” says Remus. “Alright.”

It’s cold. The fire has simmered down into ash and it’s choking him slowly.

“Just–” Sirius starts, taking a deep breath. “Can you just give me five minutes, please?”

Remus blinks. Then he nods. It’s so cold his skin is prickling. He is a slab of ice and he is cracking.

When he enters the hallway and clicks the door shut, he doesn’t mean to linger. He just needs a moment to catch his breath, which he does, and then he loses it again at the sound of Sirius crying, softly.

It cuts him deeper than a knife. He is a barren valley. All of his water is being drained. The dam is breaking free.

He’ll live on droplets. He’ll live in drought. It seems to have been decided for him.

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The next few hours are drawn directly from hell.

They don't really talk. They're seated next to each other, on the sofa with hot chocolate and marshmallows when Dorcas' family come over, conversing with her nan about codswallop, Rory in a Santa hat handing out little stocking fillers as she does every year. Sirius and Marlene go outside and attempt to make snowmen in the dwindling snow and Dorcas drags Remus out to join them, except he can't, he doesn't want to. He watches them laugh and he watches Sirius' face fall as soon as the conversation runs silent. He's an actor and he's filling the silences. Remus watches the clouds drift through the vaguely blue sky and wishes they'd move faster. He can't bear this stasis; can't bear it at all.

Regardless, he does, and Christmas dinner consists of twelve people and a baby crowded around a table built for six when normal and nine, max, when extended. It's a squeeze and it's loud and rowdy; their little kitchen is not built for multiple people and so, eventually, Hope grows irritated, as she always does, with the crowds in the kitchen and thus bans everyone from getting up from the table except Rory, her assistant, and Lyall, her little bitch boy who takes the trays to the table when she requires him to take the trays to the table and tops up glasses of wine when she required him to top up glasses of wine, an extension to keep her bloody sanity. Thus they spend an hour or two around the table, conversing.

It's jolly and it's merry and Sirius won't even look at him, and he can't bring himself to look at Sirius.

Sirius won't talk to him but he'll turn to his right to talk to Jenny about god knows fucking what - something amusing enough that he laughs loudly, sending sorrow burning through Remus' bones - and Remus turns and talks to Winnie and Dorcas, the lovely whimsical woman and her lovely whimsical daughter who keeps shooting Remus concerned glances but won't press.

Marlene plays card games with Ronnie while Aled naps, but he wakes pretty quickly. Marlene takes the baby, has him in her lap and she bounces her knees and coos and it is the only time everyone goes silent, when he laughs, and then everyone laughs. It's joyousness in its rawest form. She

gives Aled back to Ronnie, and, at some point, starts a brief conversation with Sirius in BSL over the table. Remus watches them out of the corner of his eye and he watches Dorcas watch them out of the corner of his eye. She glances at him, and then looks away immediately, and he knows he's out of the loop somewhere. He excuses himself to go to the toilet and stays up there for five minutes, and that's where Hope finds him, washing his hands in the bathroom.

"Hi, babe," she says, kissing his cheek. He smiles and lathers his hands with soap as she looks for something on the sides.

"What are you looking for?"

"There's a pack of candles in here somewhere," she says, crouching down to look in the bottom cabinet. "The ones on the table are dead."

"Try the drawer."

She finds them in the drawer with a joyous "Ah-ha!" as Remus is washing his hands, and when he turns, she's staring at him.

He raises an eyebrow.

"You and Sirius had a fight, didn't you?" she asks, cutting to the chase, and. Ah.

Remus opens his mouth and then closes it again.

"I heard raised voices," she says, softly. "Was it the ring?"

"No," Remus says, even though he thinks it might have been, "No, it wasn't. Something else."

She purses her lips and rubs the sides of his arms comfortingly. "Terrible day to have a fight, but that's what couples do. They fight."

*We're not a couple*, Remus thinks. *Never were.*

“But you’ll make up,” she continues, smiling. “He’s arse-over-tit for you, Re. If you’ve given yourselves a chance to cool down, talk to him after dinner. Yeah? You’ll be okay.”

And for some reason, that’s what does it. Remus feels the oncomings of his tears barely a second before they start and then his face is crumpling, and she's pulling him into her chest, her baby.

“Oh, don’t cry, you lovesick fool,” she murmurs, and it just makes Remus cry harder, because she doesn’t understand, she can’t, “You’ll make up just fine, don’t kid yourself into thinking he could last a day without you,” and *it’s not real, Mam, it’s fake, he’s so good that he’s got you all fooled, all of you under his thumb, including me, he had me fooled, he had me fooled.*

He pulls back sniffing and takes a couple of deep breaths, wipes his face with his sleeve. Rory calls for Hope up the stairs and she gives him a desperate look; he waves her off.

“I’ll be a few minutes,” he says, “go on, I’m fine, don’t burn my turkey.”

“Love you,” Hope says, wiping his tears herself. “You’ll be fine. You always are. My Remus.”

“Love you, Mam,” Remus is whispering back, and then she’s off, and he goes into his room where Poppy is avoiding all ruckus and digs his face into her fur, and, surprisingly, she lets him.

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It’s about twenty to four when Sirius comes into the living room and taps him on the shoulder. It’s the first they’ve looked at each other, properly, outside of when Remus came down, outfit changed into the brown turtleneck Sirius bought for him (because he likes to hurt himself, apparently) and he stared fifty daggers and three pools of Alice in Wonderland tears into his heart. It’s agony.

Remus is expecting him to say that he wants to leave now, but instead, he goes, “I’m gonna go on a walk.”

Remus blinks. His eyes flicker to look outside. The sky is cloudy but blue, a strange contrast to the snowy ground, and it's due to start getting dark in about ten minutes.

"Now?" Remus asks. "It'll get dark in a minute."

"I won't be long."

"You want—" he swallows down the *'me'*, "—anyone to come with you?"

"No," Sirius says, shaking his head. "I just want to be alone for a minute." He catches eyes with Dorcas, who is sitting on the other sofa, book in hand, and he smiles. "Lot of people, you know. Drains the social battery."

"Okay," Remus says, and Sirius displaces his smile onto him. It's not genuine.

Sirius leaves.

Dorcas is by his side in a heartbeat.

"What the fuck is going on?" she mutters, low enough so that her nan and dad, in a conversation she has just abandoned on the other sofa, can't hear.

"Nothing," Remus says.

"Remus," she says, sternly, and he takes a deep breath. "You haven't been able to take your eyes off of the man for a week and now you can't seem to bear the sight of him. What the fuck happened."

And Remus can feel the tears again. He swallows them down, and it's successful, but it might not be next time.

"For fuck's sake," Dorcas mutters, fondly, putting a hand over his. "What did you two do?"

*Everything*, Remus wants to say.

“He said it was all fake,” is what he says, twiddling with his hands in his lap. “That he didn’t mean anything. None of it was real. I *knew* it wasn’t real. I knew it wasn’t, I’m not an idiot, but it felt...” he trails off into a murmur, “the way it *felt*.”

The statement is enough. Dorcas sighs.

“It was real to you,” she says, softly. She puts a hand over his, to still them, and takes one in her own. “You idiot, it’s been real to you all along.”

Remus turns to look at her. “What?”

“God,” she groans, putting a hand over her forehead, “why do I know you better than you know yourself? It was *real* to you. You stupid idiot. You moron. You love him.” A pause. “Or, you’re damn well getting there.”

Remus blinks. And she’s right. Fuck, she’s right.

A part of him knew it already. A part of him fooled himself into not believing that he had feelings for Sirius on the basis that they were fantastical, that they were a product of the environment, that they were Remus’ loneliness and the body on the other side of his bed, warm and supple and light and lovely and kind. A fairytale affair. Some sort of cliché bedspread masterpiece in which they indulge in sweet nothings under a shroud of unsuspectability and then pull it off and return to the real world, and it could go back to normal. An illicit affair that shatters like the placidity of ice over lily pads, broken with a single skimmed pebble. Potential seeping out of pores into the lake until it’s thick with what could have been. What could be.

And maybe a part of him knew, too, that he could never fight Sirius. He could never fight his influence, whether positive or negative, it was there, perusing the hallways and slinking around on marble floors and layered in clothing under a childhood quilt, heat emanating off of him like a sauna, like a drug. Maybe he was too good and Remus fell too hard. Remus took more than Sirius was willing to give, even after he said that he wouldn’t. He feels sick to his stomach.

“Either way, he’s not mine,” says Remus, “I have to make my peace with that.”

Dorcas sits back. As if she’s in shock. He looks at her, and she’s staring at him as if he’s absolutely fucking insane.

“He has been yours since the moment he walked into this house,” she says, as if he should know this.

Straight and deadpan, she tells him this. No fantasticality about the way she’s looking at him. Pleading for the third eye to open. Life goes on around them, townies and smiles and the crackling of logs, and maybe they don’t have to exist in a hideaway, in a hovel.

(Maybe something can exist everywhere, if you want it badly enough.)

He stumps out the hope like a cigarette butt and shakes his head.

“Why is he leaving, then?” he asks. “If he wants to be mine as much as I want to be his then why would he run away from it?”

Dorcas sighs. She licks her lips, and shrugs, staring imploringly into the fire as if it is going to spit all of the answers.

“Maybe he’s just as stupid as you are,” she murmurs, a wisp into pinecone bristles, and Remus— there’s no other choice, really. No other choice than the inevitable road to take back to him. Rejection would be a relief to this ache and potential sparks his nerve endings for him, so he moves.

He gets up, without a word, and Dorcas calls, “Don’t forget your scarf.”

Upon turning, she throws it at him. He doesn’t even know how it got into her possession.

“Don’t let him go, you village idiot,” she says, grin lighting up her face, and Remus grabs his walking stick from where he left it leaning against the arm of the sofa and goes to retrieve his coat.

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Remus knows where Sirius is.

He walks the nature trail, he knows it like the back of his hand. It feels incomplete without Fizzy. It feels incomplete without Sirius - god, that's *ridiculous*, it's ridiculous how Sirius can enter his world and ruin it within a matter of weeks. A matter of days. He's like a hurricane. His path is disastrous, and Remus tastes this, spice on his tongue as he pads over the footsteps that have already traced this route and lays eyes upon him, sitting on the bench, alone. His path is disastrous and it's the only path. It's the road not taken and the road indulged all in one. He's a special one. He is.

Remus walks up to him, snow crunching underneath his boots. Sirius doesn't spare him a glance. He sits next to him, silent, and he says nothing and Sirius says nothing, staring out over the fields and the lingering, limp-moving waters, shadowed by what is the sun's last pathetic attempt to shine. To colour the sky with some sort of progeny. Some sort of faith.

He needs it. The clouds are leaking, tinged a burnt orange, and he holds onto it.

All that Remus can hear is their breaths and the rushing of the air in his ears as he says, timidly into the silence:

"I don't want you to go."

Sirius doesn't react, at first. It takes a moment, and then he inhales, slowly, and works his jaw. It's in anguish.

"Don't," he breathes, still unable to look at him. Sirius is pleading. They're pleading. "Don't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because I'll stay."

There's a beat, in which he's held in the palm of Remus' hand, and Remus is held in the palm of his.

“Would that be so bad?” Remus asks, bordering on a laugh. He’s not sure if it’s bitter or begging. Sirius’ lip trembles.

“Yes,” he says, and it could be a wave, it could be the wind, he could be anything, “it would, because I want more than you can give me. I need more than you can offer.”

Remus shakes his head. It’s slow and then quick. The cogs in his brain are churning and all he can think is *I’d offer you everything, don’t you see, you little fool?*

“I’d give you everything for you to stay,” is how this is voiced. As confidently as a wave crashes he professes, everything.

This gets Sirius to turn. His bottom lip is raw and bitten and his eyes are swimming.

“Stop it.”

“Sirius—”

“I mean it,” he says, and he stands up. Shaking his head. “*Stop* it. I can’t pretend anymore. I can’t play fucking games anymore, Remus, I can’t, I need you to be transparent. I need *you*, who *you* are. Not whatever the hell you pretend to be. I don’t know who is who. I don’t know— I don’t—”

“The me that you had was the real me,” Remus says, pushing himself up to stand, to match him. “But I didn’t know. I didn’t know he even existed until you came along.”

“Remus.”

“And you were— what? You were faking, *everything*,” he says, voice raising slightly. A tear falls onto Sirius’ delicate cheek but his face twists into something beyond recognition.

“*I* was faking?” he says, harsh. “You were the one pretending from the start. You were the one who brought me here to use and *you* were the one who ruined *everything*—”

“I–” Remus splutters, genuinely baffled and even slightly a little bit angry, “You’re *leaving*–”

“Because this means *more* to me!” he yells, dangerously. With his whole soul. Pointing with a tense finger.

(His ring is on. Remus has no idea when he put it back on. It glints in the sunset. He feels hope between his barren ribs.)

“I’m leaving because this means more to me,” a repetition, he’s not calming down, it’s a supernova, “For fuck’s sake, you mean *more* to me, Remus, too much to continue whatever the hell– whatever fairytale we’ve been pretending to be. Whatever *you* you want me to meet... God, Remus. None of them were mine. I never *had* you.”

“I–”

“No,” Sirius says, holding a hand up, “I just– let me speak, I just need to speak. You just need to hear it.”

Remus is quiet. Sirius takes a deep, shuddering breath.

“I’ve been scavenging pieces of you for two years,” he whispers, and a bitter, disbelieving smile chokes its way onto his face. “Didn’t you know? Can’t you see? I didn’t have to pretend to look at you the way I did. I didn’t have to *pretend* to be in love with you. You fucking oblivious bastard. You never looked at me like I was anything more than the worst parts of me. You never let yourself see them. It was eating me alive.”

He takes a breath, a shaky one, one of woe.

“And then,” he continues, smiling again, but this one is more nostalgic, this one is a dream, “then, we come here, and you care. You *care*, Remus, and you look at me and it’s– dangerous, it was dangerous, I should’ve told you to stop the first fucking moment, I shouldn’t have let it go on this long but I...” he cuts off. Swallows, viscerally.

“Sirius,” says Remus, but he can’t seem to say any more.

“I got lost in it,” he says, eventually. Staring at Remus from behind tear-stained eyes. Carmine cheeks. He is so lovely. “I got lost in you. You were all I wanted, and to have even a part of you, a part, even if it was all fake, I could just let myself *pretend*—”

“For Christ’s sake, it *wasn’t*,” Remus interjects, eagerly, heart pounding a metallic rhythm in his ears.

Sirius inhales sharply. As if he’s only just let himself hear the words that Remus feels like he’s been screaming. “What?”

“It wasn’t fake,” he says, shaking his head. Taking a step forward. “By God, it was *never fake*.”

“You can’t play with me,” Sirius says, desperately, shaking his head, “that would be cruel, you can’t be cruel, Remus—”

“I’m not,” he says. As earnest as he can. Sirius is a windswept wonder, he’s the peak of snow, the first fall of it. The magic.

He’s all of the magic. Remus is drunk on it. He has a lifetime supply. He doesn’t want this to end.

“I’m sorry,” says Remus, as fast as he can, baring his soul while he gets a chance, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry that I didn’t see you before. But I see you now. Oh, God, I see you now. You’re *all* I see. You’re the entire cosmos, my love. You’re everything around me, the fabric of the universe, you’re so subtle I didn’t notice until you had your hands around my throat, you were squeezing, you— you—” he loses his breath. He can’t breathe. Sirius is his breath. He’s water in the palm of his hands and fire in the breadth of his throat, Remus is sick, he’s entangled, petals and ruin and honeycomb spice.

Sirius is crying. He’s so lovely.

“You are my most authentic self,” Remus whispers. “I’m sorry it took me so long to realise. But I see you now. I see you like you see me.”

He takes a breath.

“And I’ll be yours, really, this time,” he says, on a silver fucking platter, “if you’ll do the inexplicable honour of being mine.”

He sees him, strands of hair wafting in the breeze, cheeks flushed red, skin rough and blotchy and tainted in the most poetically beautiful way. Watercolour sun painting the snow, everything tinged, everything in a hue that is unlike any other. It’s love and it’s lust and it’s enlightenment and it’s vivacity. He’s standing, his fingers are raw and red and shaking and his bottom lip, Remus wants to catch it between his teeth, it’s his, he’s *his*, they were kidding themselves when they were pretending they were anything less than each others from the moment they stepped foot on the others barren soil.

Sirius lets out a low, upheaval of a sob and pads over to him, and it’s almost metaphysical how stunningly they fit together, how he gives over his essence, how he places the reigns in Remus’ burnt palms and how he holds onto him like they’re sinking and he’s the last thing he wants to touch. Sirius buries his face into the crook of Remus’ neck and inhales and Remus holds him, one hand by the head and one by the waist. He presses kisses to the side of his head, to every part of him he could possibly reach, tries to identify every inch of him with nothing but bloody fingerprints and the glow of a glorious sunset as Sirius pulls back and kisses him.

It’s so real. It’s so real. It’s the realest thing Remus has ever felt, Sirius all over him, Sirius in his bloodstream, in his mouth. It’s perfect and it’s beautiful and it’s nothing short of divine. He can’t be anything else. They can’t be anything else, they’re everything and they’re nothing, they’re people aligned in space and time, a billion in one chance of transfusion. They’re welded together.

It’s intermolecular. Remus can feel a burning star gripping his hair and a burning star gripping his heart. He wouldn’t have it any other way.

Remus drops his head against Sirius’, lips spit-slick. He closes his eyes and Remus feels a tingle of warmth against his cheek from where the cold sun is bleating, Helios and his chariot, burning bridges between their chests like the red string of everloving fucking fate, that’s what it feels like.

“You mean it?” Sirius whispers, gripping his face with cold palms. “You’ll have me?”

“All of you.”

“In Devon, too?” he asks, and Remus can feel the anxieties about the shift, “because it’ll be different, you know it won’t be picture-perfect like it is here—”

Remus shushes him and grips his face, and somehow he knows exactly what to say.

“I’ll have all of you, you fool,” he whispers against his lips. “Anywhere. Everywhere. I’d have you in bloody Antarctica if we could live there without freezing.”

Sirius laughs, runs his hands through Remus’ hair, and Remus doesn’t need to say anything. He just needs to kiss him.

He does.

Sirius pulls back after a moment, only gently, mouth still parted and cheeks still blushed, hair blowing against the light breeze. He puts his hands over Remus’, which are cupping his neck. Takes them, so very gentle.

“Your hands are cold,” he says, quietly. Eyes flickering back up to Remus’, the sun’s orbit. He pulls them up and presses a kiss to each of his knuckles.

The sky is mauve, burnt ash and charming russet on gold, aurora bleeding through the sky.

Remus thinks he would like to stay awhile.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter is an epilogue and then we're done !

## ix

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

No one really tells you what's supposed to happen when the story is over.

Idealism is something that Remus has struggled with a lot in his life. It's hard to romanticise the world around you when it's dreary and colourless. There was a period during his undergraduate where historicism sent him into a sort of spiral, over perception and expectation, over archetypes and living up to them. Like he was in the idyllic canoe of Wordsworth's *Prelude* and the monstrous mountains were overbearing and creeping over the northern sky like overgrown ivy, unwelcome, someone else's precipice, someone else's thoughts and feelings. He bathed in unoriginality until he garnered enough strength to mow the vines down and then - well, then he was left to sift through and make something of life for his own.

Reconceptualising life for yourself is a terrifying prospect. It's building upon ground that is less than shaky but nonexistent, throwing essences of yourself into a black hole and hoping it regurgitates something marvellous and Remus did not think it was truly possible until Sirius drew his cold lips away from Remus' cold hands and looked up at him, and his eyes were a technicolour dream and Remus was falling.

It was sailing from there, really.

Not physically. Remus definitely slipped once or twice while they walked back up, tears dried and dust settled and sun set just enough for the through of cold to be lathered over them, and they returned to the cottage. Nobody noticed anything out of sorts outside of what had already been noticed - Hope smiled at Remus, seeing him hand in hand with Sirius again, and she presumed the fight had been resolved. Dorcas smiled at Remus, quirked an eyebrow up. He would not get the chance to explain the moment they had shared upon crisp untouched melting snow to her for another day or two, but when he did she would meet him with a large grin and a larger than life

love, one she had always carried, one he had drunk out of like a horse from a trough.

The 27th came and went. Remus cannot even remember what they did on that day. He's quite certain they slept half the day away and then went to walk Fizzy down around the dirt road where they got stuck, not a week ago, by the bed of the Cleddau Du.

And it goes on. And on, and on.

They stay until New Years, in which they get horrendously wine drunk at the pub and don't make it home in time for the countdown, settling to fumble into a ridiculously messy New Year's kiss down the road underneath the light from streetlight and a red amber gold amalgamation of twinkling starlike lights from fireworks down the road, as Remus kisses his own star and rings in the New Year with an overwhelming feeling in his gut that he doesn't think he's felt before.

The goodbye is tearful. Marlene cries and clings onto Sirius and refuses to let him go and Jenny squeezes Remus so hard he can barely breathe and promises to send him Aled pics on the regular.

Dorcas says goodbye to him, last. She simply hugs him. They're way past grand goodbyes and regal hellos, they are a part of each other, past present and future, and yet Remus gets a little choked up when she snuggles her head into the crook of his neck and whispers, "I love you, you know."

"I love you too," he murmurs back.

"You great oaf. Text me when you're home safe." She pulls back, and squeezes the sides of his arms. "I'll probably see you in about a month anyway when *this* one," gesturing to Marlene, still hugging Sirius, "inevitably drags me back into the land of the Englishmen."

Remus chuckles and turns to look at them, fondly. "Bonded for life, I think," he murmurs.

Dorcas sniffs. And then she nods.



“So are we,” she says, resolutely, and Remus turns to her and grins. He pulls her back in and squeezes, swaying her like one would a child or a very adorable puppy, and she laughs into his chest.

“So are we,” he repeats.

He lets go just in time to watch Marlene let go of Sirius, finally, and Hope projects herself forward. Sirius laughs and falls into her embrace like he’s been waiting for it.

“Get home safe,” she says, swaying him, “wrap up warm. Don’t let Remus drive you crazy. Oh, it’s been such a delight, love, thank you so much for coming.”

“Thank you for having me,” he whispers, over her shoulder. “It’s been an honour.”

And he looks at Remus. And he smiles. Hope pulls him over and they have a sort of three-way hug, and it’s delightful.

Lyall gives gruff hugs and reserved goodbyes as he always does and Hope continues to fuss, fuss and fuss some more. She steals Sirius’ phone number to add him to the Whatsapp group - Remus gets the notification that she’s done it already as they turn the corner and the cottage is out of sight.

Sirius sniffs.

“You okay?” Remus asks, turning the wheel and catching a glimpse of him. Sirius turns to him and smiles, though his eyes are watery.

“Perfect,” he says. Remus flickers his eyes back onto the road but moves one hand from the wheel and squeezes Sirius’ thigh. Sirius takes it and laces their fingers together, kissing his knuckles.

“Absolutely perfect,” he murmurs into his skin, and Remus smiles.

And he drives.

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There are approximately 6.5 seconds between the first of his form entering the classroom at 8:30 on the first day back, and the start of Remus' inevitable interrogation as to what exactly he got up to over his Christmas holidays.

It begins with Izzy.

"How was your Christmas, sir?" she asks, throwing her backpack onto her table and slumping into her seat, besides her friend Leslie and *her* friend Maira. Emphasis on the *her*. Remus is very attuned to the dramatics of their little friendship group, it brings him great joy to eavesdrop.

His lips quirk up and betray his consciousness, and Izzy grins immediately. He knows that she knows. She knows that he knows that she knows. Tilly will have messaged her the minute she got her data back. Remus takes pride in the fact that, at 6.5 seconds as previously stated, he was closer with his guess of 5 than Lily's guess (10 seconds) and Sirius' guess (0.5).

(James did not guess. He simply laughed at them.)

Remus shuffles the papers he's sifting through and looks at her over his glasses. "Cold," is his deadpan answer. "How was yours?"

"Boring," she replies.

It is at this point that Maira feels the need to interject.

"Did you go to Wales?" she asks, and Remus raises an eyebrow. Izzy shoots her the dirtiest glare her little eyes can manage.

"I did," he replies.

"Are you Welsh?" Shauna, a girl with box braids who has been sitting on her phone next to Maira during this entire exchange asks, seemingly out of nowhere, and all of the girls fall into laughter.

Dan, who is Tilly's beau and Izzy's best friend since the day in Year 8 when he tried to throw an apple into the bin and hit her in the head instead, walks into the door with his top button undone and his shirt hanging out. Remus

only has to give him a look and he's grinning sheepishly, swinging his bag onto the table and collapsing into the chair next to her.

"*Obviously* he's Welsh," Izzy continues, chidingly, as Dan fusses with his uniform. "Haven't you been hearing him speak?"

"No she has not," Remus says, primly, "I'm convinced my words just go in one ear and out the other with you lot."

"Untrue," Maira pipes up. "I listen."

"I do, too," Dan says, fiddling with his top button. Izzy, who Remus has grown to learn is quite neurotic, huffs and pulls him towards her by the collar to do it herself. "I'm well good at English, aren't I, sir?"

And, well. He is.

"Yes, you are," Remus says, slowly, "so I presume you got that past paper I set for you to do over Christmas done?"

It's due in a week and a half - he's not *completely* inconsiderate - but Dan's face still drains of colour.

"Yes," he says, slowly, and Izzy laughs, "Yes, I *absolutely* got that past paper done. And I definitely did *not* forget about it and leave it in my locker over Christmas."

Remus tuts. "Of course. Definitely not."

He shakes her head. "Definitely," he says, and then, "on a *completely* unrelated note, sir, do you mind if I go to my locker to get something I forgot in there?"

Remus nods, and he gets up and goes, sort of panickedly shoving his shirt into his trousers before Remus can call him out for it again. It makes him laugh.

He turns and starts organising his papers again, but not without a comedic "whatever could he have left in his locker?" which leaves Izzy and the girls

in stitches, and then he thinks that the subject of Wales has blown over until he has English fourth period, and Christopher bounds in late with Izzy on his arm and yells to the classroom at large, “Sir, are you shagging Mr. Black?”

Needless to say, Remus gives him two weeks worth of detentions. He tells Sirius after school and he laughs so hard he actually has to pull over on the side of the road for five minutes while he composes himself.

It turns out not to be the worst thing to happen in the world. The kids annoy both him and Sirius about it for maybe two weeks and then the older students realise that they actually have exams and responsibilities and curl up into their revision hermit shells and the younger kids... well. Remus very much enjoys giving them detentions. It gets to February and Sirius gives up on denying it and outright says “Yes” whenever anyone asks. The bluntness of it seems to shut the kids up, and then March comes and Lily starts showing and there’s something more exciting to talk about.

This is a very interesting development, in that Sirius and Remus take James and Lily out to dinner almost as soon as they get back, intending to tell them calmly and intimately about their relationship. It does not go to plan.

In fact, it goes something like this:

“If you want to buy a bottle you can,” Sirius says, January fourth, pointing to the Malbec listed that he knows Remus likes. “I think it’d come out cheaper if you were to buy the bottle for the three of you and I’ll get a separate glass.”

Remus looks up at the both of them. “That sound good?”

They look at each other. It’s a stricken gaze. Remus is immediately confused.

“...What?”

“I think maybe we should get separate glasses,” James suggests.

“But you’d be dropping an extra, like, £12 collectively on that,” Sirius says, squinting at the menu.

“He’s right,” pipes up the waiter. Lily scowls at him. It is very un-Lily like.

“I’m not drinking,” she says, placidly, and Remus raises his eyebrows.

“Really? All week you’ve been texting me saying you were craving a good rosé—”

“Yes, well, things change,” she says, snapping her menu shut and smiling at the waiter. “Diet Coke for me, please.”

“Hey, Remus, look,” Sirius whispers, flicking through the menu. “Will you go halves with me on a seafood platter? I’ve been really fancying some Scampi after that box Jenny got from the chippy.”

“Who the hell is Jenny?” James asks.

“Jenny is my cousin,” Remus says.

“Glass of Pinot Grigio, please,” Sirius smiles to the waiter, noticing he’s... well, waiting. He writes it down.

“When did Sirius meet your cousin?” asks Lily, fully bewildered now.

“Any other drinks?” probes the waiter, and Remus blinks.

“Ah,” he says, tapping his fingers on the table absent-mindedly. He looks at the menu, then back up at Lily. “Are you *sure* you won’t want a glass of wine?”

“I’m quite sure.”

“The two of us could just finish the bottle?” James suggests.

“The last time you said that I ended up drinking the whole thing!”

His finger is still tapping. Sirius rolls his eyes and places his hand over it, and Remus, still scanning the menu, instinctively laces their fingers together and squeezes.

Lily's mouth falls open.

"What's that?" she asks, pointing.

It's almost fucking comical how in sync they are when they both look down at their hands, and quickly they unlace their fingers.

"Nothing," Sirius says, shrugging. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"Just get the bottle of Malbec," James says, looking up at the waiter, and he nods.

"Are you *together*?" Lily asks, aghast, "Is this— what the hell is this? Sirius?"

"Two glasses or three, then?" asks the waiter to the table at large, but James has caught wind of the conversation at the table, now, and he's not listening.

"*You two?*"

"Listen," Remus says, "It's a long story—"

"—we were gonna tell you at the end of the night—"

"Oh my God," Lily says.

"Wait, you're together?" James asks.

They nod.

"You're not joking?"

They shake their heads.

There's a moment, and then James throws his head back and, quite literally, guffaws.

"That's—" he splutters, "we were going to tell *you* tonight—"

"I need a glass of wine," Lily mutters, head in hands.

"Three glasses then?" asks the eager waiter.

"No, for Christ's sake, I'm pregnant!" she shrieks, and the table falls silent.

Utterly silent.

And then;

"Congratulations...?" says the waiter.

Sirius' hand is tight over his mouth and Remus' jaw is slack.

"Surpriiiiise?" James says, sheepishly, holding up jazz hands.

While they gather their bearings Lily turns to the poor waiter and apologises, assuring him that the wine and the coke is okay. It's safe to say that they pooled together a hefty tip for the poor man, and once the shock blew over it was a night full of congratulations.

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Remus hands his notice in in March. By chance, so does Severus Snape, and Sirius is equal parts upset that Remus is leaving as absolutely bloody delighted that Snape is.

It is a long time coming, he thinks. It's not that he wants to give up the teaching position, he loves it, loves the kids; even the ones he hates, he loves. It's brought him joy but it has also made him something less of himself. He's not sure what he wants to do. It has been many a sad phone conversation, many a sad in person conversation when Sirius throws pebbles at his window like some cheesy noughties movie protagonist (not a joke; he did it once. It is much less romantic and much more terrifying in

real life, Remus will tell you that.) Regardless; many a supportive comment led Remus into believing he could try out a different career path, that it's fitting, not yet 30. He has a whole life at his fingertips, waiting to be explored; it was just a matter of realising that. And he might go back to teaching. He doesn't have to decide that right now. Sirius kisses the emotions out of him and supports him every step of the way, to the very last moment when he hands in his written notice.

And it's ridiculous to Remus how smooth of a sail it has been. The first week back in the city was marginally strange, simply because their love had festered on grounds unlike the ones that they clung to now, and the adjustment period took a minute to go through. But it was so easy, so easy to look at Sirius fanned out on his bed and so easy to look at him freelance in the park by his house and feel the heart thumping against his chest, the heart that was his. And know he had left nothing in Wales but the memory of manifestation. To know that he had brought everything with him, here, in his arms and his house. Sirius', too. How stupid he had been to think that Sirius, Sirius with his love as big as worlds and twice as bright would not carry him in every single atom of everything he owned. How stupid he had been to think that a stranger's house would be a stranger's house at all, that the nuances and the intricacies and the morifying ordeal of being known in their little corner in Wales would not burst out of her cage like fireworks upon reentry. That Sirius loved him *that* much, enough to keep him in a little space in his pocket and sprinkle him upon balustrades and countertops until everything he touched was warm with comfortability and all of the stars aligned on that balcony where, once upon a time, everything had changed.

They can make anywhere their own. Remus can curve his palm around Sirius' bedpost and make it his own but it won't erase the ghosts of Sirius' past floating down the halls, just as real even if Remus can't see them, and so when Sirius walks in one evening and proclaims that he hates his house, he takes him by the waist and nods.

"I know, babe," he says. It's a sensitive sort of night. An anniversary of something is coming up. He hasn't told Remus yet and that's okay. They open each other up in intervals and it's the happiest Remus has ever been.



“I hate it,” Sirius says, agitated, as Remus kisses his forehead and Sirius melts into his touch. “I don’t feel like myself here. I don’t know who I am.”

Remus takes a deep breath in, and holds him tighter.

“I know *exactly* who you are,” he whispers. “I know you inside out. I’d know every inch of you old and creaky and decrepit. Frostbitten under a starless sky, you’re the light. That’s what you are.”

Sirius breathes in time with him, regulating. “Okay, you’re a stupid poet and I hate you.”

Remus grins. “Good thing I love you enough for both of us, then.”

This is the first time he said it. It’s almost picturesquely perfect.

Sirius pulls back and looks at him with so much intensity that it could knock Remus off his feet, but he stays firmly planted in his hurricane, hands locked around the small of his back.

“Not possible,” Sirius says, shaking his head. “Not even anywhere near possible. Not touching the *edges* of possible. Not—”

“Can you just kiss me?”

Sirius smiles and leans in. Remus murmurs “Fool” into his mouth and his grin simply widens.

Regardless, it’s in the weeks after that night that they really talk about putting the house on the market (‘talk’ in the sense that Sirius talks and Remus listens, or Sirius talks to his brother and Remus is there for moral support, or Sirius talks to his cousin and Remus is... still there for moral support). All of them agree that anything to ruffle his dear sister’s feathers would be what Alphard would have wanted, and it’s only after Regulus flies in from Spain and Andromeda drives up from Brighton and they have one last sort of hurrah in the form of a sleepover style party that they definitely should have outgrown by now that Sirius wakes up the next morning in the

midst of a pillow fort in the living room and says *yes, perhaps, perhaps change is good*.

Perhaps change is just what they need. Perhaps it was always what they needed. Taking a leap of faith can end in amazement or agony, but either one of those are infinite times better than monotony. And this is what Remus learns with Sirius, every single day. Monotony comes in a million shades and dazzling technicolours with him and it's unbelievable that he ever settled for anything less than waiting for the dawn of a new day with excitement rather than dread.

Onto better journeys. A flat ten minutes down from Remus and the Potter's, a new godfather to a gorgeous baby girl and love that festered in the winter and caught manic god-blessed fire in the summer; it's a far cry from the rural pastels of hometown Wales, but it, in some ways, shall always stand as their home to crawl back to. And isn't that something.

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Christmas Day happens at the Lupin's.

They don't go until the twenty-third. There's essay marking for Sirius and nine hour shifts for Remus at a new job he's whole-heartedly enjoying and there's Mary and Peter and Lily and James, their friendsmas at the Potter's on the twenty-first. Sirius and Remus, of course, had invited them down, but with a three-month-old and a nine year old who won't leave her alone and a post-partum mother and husband who won't leave *her* alone it felt like a bit too much stress, which was understandable. Mary drops them all canvases as presents (she paints a portrait of Poppy for Remus - it makes him cry) and whisks herself off on the train leaving a trail of glitter behind her as she goes and Peter has a new girlfriend, Abigail, and it seems serious. He wants to marry her. It's barely been six months.

Remus might have disapproved, once. But now he thinks that when you know, you know.

He knows, when Sirius rushes out of the car before he's even switched the engine off and hurtles himself into Hope's arms, then Dorcas and then

Marlene's who have been waiting patiently for three months since their last trip down (which included a gay bar, an emerald green thong and Remus who is too old for this.) (You'd think it had been fifty years by the way they reunited.)

There's no Poppy this year, but there is Fizzy, who goes fucking mental when she sees Sirius. There's no Monday night soap considering the fact that it's a Thursday but there are chestnuts and there is hot chocolate and there is a gorged on advent calendar and there are pancakes and there is snow; late this year and barely, but it's there, on the twenty-fourth. It's not a white Christmas but it's close. It's close enough.

"One day," Sirius murmurs, huddled in his arms on the bed that they made theirs a year ago, now, where everything changed, "one day, we're going to move to Wales."

"Hmm?" Remus smiles, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. "We are?"

"Mhm," Sirius says, leaning back to look at him. He traces his jawline with his forefinger. "Everything is just so... easy, here."

Remus combs through his hair with his fingers. He nods.

"One day we're going to live up here," Sirius whispers. "We're going to live in a little remote cottage with vines up the crumbling brick walls about half an hour from your parents', and we're going to frolic with the sheep and dance with the buskers, and we'll be able to live in this paradise forever."

"You'd want that?" Remus says.

"Yeah," Sirius says, nodding gently. "Would you?"

Remus shrugs. The truth is is that he's a man under a sickening thumb. He'd go wherever Sirius goes without question. Home doesn't really feel like home unless he's there; it's not the scenery that's the paradise. It's—

“All I want is you,” Remus murmurs, moving his hands down to the small of his back and holding him there.

—him. He’s the paradise that the sunken snow clings onto.

Sirius scoffs, flustered, and ducks his head onto Remus’ chest from where he’s propping himself up. “Schmoozer,” he mumbles, and Remus pulls his head up and kisses him, smiling into it like a madman.

Hope calls them down for dinner after a minute or two and they get up. Sirius hops over Fizzy and out of the door, two footsteps down the stairs, as Remus smiles to himself gently, flicks the light off and closes the door.

There’s no sound in the bedroom, except the free ticking of the clock. The window is shut and there is no breeze. Just snowflakes dancing in front of the glass like dancers on a stage, eyeing the ruffled sheets and the hung up coats and the strewn bunny slippers on the dog-fur coated rug as they fall. A fallen snowflake chancing a glimpse of a home that is not their own. You, looking through a kaleidoscope. I implore you to keep looking.

For if you were to keep falling, guided by the wind’s pulse as her commanding hand waves, you would spiral through the dark air and down to the golden frame of the downstairs window. It is identical in build but not in joy as it seeps through the cottage and into the two figures that you see coming through the door. One pulls out a chair for the other. He leans over into the gruff old man’s welcoming space, nattering away about something that makes him chuckle as the tallest dances over with hands full of cutlery, shadowed by the small woman that exudes love to her very bones, and sets the table. Steaming plates are put down onto carmine red table spreads and dusty old floors creak with wood against wood as chairs are dragged out, and the last thing you see before settling on the windowsill and melting into nothing is glory. The gold rush of the candlelight, the red flush of the laughter and the glorious, lonely men, loved once more.

The ticking clock halts, and that’s your signal. You can melt, now. It’s okay. They’re happy.

Chapter End Notes

and we're done! thank you so much for reading, your comments have truly meant the world to me and I'm so happy these two could sprinkle a little bit of joy through the festive season :) that being said, I hope you all have a lovely Xmas eve/day if you celebrate!! and if you don't... well, it's also my birthday tomorrow so you could celebrate that instead ;)

happy holidays to you all ♥ see you soon,  
xxx jude

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