

Ludus loved his brother. He loved many of his [siblings], but the use of the banispeech word for [sibling] or [brother] or [sister] was, as he understood it, based on Idris's interpretation of what Embly described in human families. It was the same logic behind calling Idris [Mom] and Mithras [Dad]. Not really the same as humans at all.

There was no blood tying them together, at least not in the way human families were tied by blood. Their bonds were just as random if one wanted to be philosophical, but in reality, they were basically all just roommates, which was the word Hacksaw used to describe them.

He also used meaner words, but that was okay.

Ludus, however, really did think the human word for brother was how he thought of Worm Money. Still not the blood related version, but the other way. The way where he would go above and beyond to support him, even when it was inconvenient. Even when Worm Money didn't always reciprocate to the same degree.

Many of his followers, back when he wasn't heeding Worm Money's boundaries about it, mentioned as such. Despite Worm Money's insistence that he not be streamed, Ludus's followers quite liked when he showed up. Always begged for an audience with "the candy king" before temporarily devolving into a swirl of inside jokes, much to the bewilderment of newbies.

"Oh, looks run in the family for sure."

"I was here for the cameo!"

Brothers in arms.

Spring loomed in the middle distance, which gave winter the nerve to be stubborn. It seemed like every other day where the temperatures would threaten to warm up enough to melt the snow completely before another storm hit.

This morning, the skies were their typical gray. Light gray, with a fine blanket of snow already on the ground, undisturbed by all but the birds and other hardy urban animals. Flakes still fell from the sky and Ludus woke with a big yawn.

He blinked his big blue eyes as the house around him remained quiet and calm. The biters weren't awake yet, which meant that if he was quick, he'd have the chance to play without worrying about being disturbed.

He didn't hate the biters, but they could be overwhelming in large numbers, and, quite frankly, he had a lot on his plate. Worm Money was getting better by the day, but was still skittish and would freak out if it was too loud, or if the biters got too close. Poor guy hadn't been outside in weeks.

Ludus wiggled in place. He, Worm Money, and the other lifer were tangled in a big pile of fur and limbs. It was comfortably warm, but Ludus wanted to see if Worm Money would leave the house, even if it was only for a little bit.

"Eggy, time to go," he whispered. "What's the forecast for today?"

The other lifer wheezed to life and slithered off the bed, surprisingly fluid for how long and strange he was, a black serpent under a white shag carpet. While no words were spoken, the long stare told Ludus everything he needed to know. And, just like that, the other lifer was gone.

"Worminey," Ludus said, pulling Worm Money's ears. "Worminey, wake up."

Worm Money's cluster eyes opened first. There were quite a few dotted along his chest and abdomen, hazy rings of vibrant blues and eye searing pinks, but they blinked irregularly before synchronizing and looking at Ludus.

"We should try to play outside today," Ludus said, a big dopey smile spread across the corners of his lips. He moved the creamy wave of fur out of his eyes so he could see better. "There's fresh snow. We could make snow angels. Or snowcrooks."

Already, Worm Money's eyes flicked in odd directions, anxiety bubbling between the clusters. Ludus patted him, his confidence unwavering.

"It'll be alright. You can trust me, I'll make sure everything's okay. I promise."

Worm Money took a deep breath, and he wheezed out an answer. "I will try," he said with his first voice. Fear lurked in the second. "Just for you."

"Okay," Ludus replied. "Let's get ready, but be quiet because the biters are still sleeping."

They did just that. Ludus waited for Worm Money to be fully dressed before donning a hat and scarf and grabbing Worm Money's hand. They went to Hacksaw's bedroom and Ludus knocked as quietly as he could.

Hacksaw cracked the door. "What do you want, newt?"

Ludus came prepared with a proper pout. His eyes, big and watery, caught Hacksaw's gaze and he pressed his hands together in a plea. "Hacksaw, please come outside with us. I think Worminey would feel safer with you around too."

Hacksaw snorted, and looked to Worm Money, who did not meet his eyes. Ever since Jolyne attacked him, he was quiet and scared, always shaking like a leaf. He held no loyalty to this young, nosy crook, and didn't really care all that much about whether Worm Money felt safe.

However, Ludus, when he pouted, was difficult to resist, and that annoyed the shit out of Hacksaw because he wasn't supposed to think much of Ludus either, despite their dalliances.

"Fine," he grunted. "But I am leaving as soon as the biters come for breakfast."

Ludus held his joy in for long enough for them to get to the back door. Hacksaw sported a new coat that fit him perfectly, and he stood, motionless, as Worm Money froze in the doorway.

"I'm sorry," Worm Money said, hands wringing. He watched the snow fall, all sound dampened in the early morning. "I'm not trying to be a buzzkill. I'm just, you know. It snowed when, uh, you know."

He trailed off and Ludus blinked at him, patient. "Will it help if I list the reasons you'll have fun?"

"Maybe..."

Ludus counted on his fingers. "One, it's totally fresh snow and that means it is the softest and the tastiest. Two, we can make a snowcrock, because I watched this one video and I tried it with Hacksaw and he had fun. But, uhm, if you want to watch a different one, I can do that, too.

"Three, I think you will like it being quiet when it is also outside. You know, because it's usually loud outside. And if you miss your chance, it won't come around again until next year I think.

"Hacksaw, do you have a reason?"

Hacksaw grunted again. "Hot chocolate."

"Oh!" Ludus gasped. "Yeah, that's a good one. And four, we can have hot cocoa afterwards with as many marshmallows as we want. I saw a big bag of 'em in the cabinet. Is that enough reasons? Because I have more."

Worm Money smiled. That was enough for him to at least step out onto the back porch. As soon as Hacksaw closed the door, he perched on the edge of the wooden planks with his arms folded over his knees, cluster eyes swiveling. Ludus stood next to him, arm outstretched to catch a few flakes.

"Try it, maybe you can see the shapes better than me."

Worm Money tentatively stuck his arm out, and noted every single flake that landed on his palm and melted into his skin. He flexed his fingers one by one and stepped off the porch, crunching snow underfoot. It really was as soft as Ludus described.

He stopped down, balled up a handful of snow and rolled it along the ground, quiet and slow. Ludus followed after him with a ball of his own ready to roll.

"Good, you know how to do it," Ludus said, somewhat relieved. "Then you make the butt and I'll make the chest."

"The butt?"

"The bottom," Ludus replied confidently. "They call it the butt in Stonewing."

Worm Money laughed. "I have never heard it called the butt, you're making that up."

"I swear! Hacksaw knows."

Hacksaw hissed. "Do not drag me into your nonsense."

"See?"

Worm Money laughed more. The sound didn't travel far, and he found that he liked that the world was, indeed, quiet despite being outside. When no one else was around, he felt safe enough to laugh. "Oh, okay. Whatever you say, Ludo. I'll make the butt and you can make the chest."

"Excellent."

They rolled their expanding snowballs in zigzags across the yard. Worm Money couldn't tell when Ludus was going to stop, so he kept rolling and rolling until his snowball had become more of a snow boulder.

"I think we should stop."

Ludus rolled his snow boulder over and assessed their situation. Yes, the balls were entirely too large to be a butt and a chest.

"I think we have two butts," Ludus admitted.

"Guess we'll have to make two chests."

They set about rolling more snowballs into slightly smaller snow boulders, and when they were of appropriate size, Ludus hoisted them into position. However, they were too heavy to stay on their own.

"Quick!" Ludus cried, shifting the boulder with his other arm. Worm Money jumped. "Oops, sorry, Worminey. Pack the snow in before it falls."

Worm Money scooped handfuls of snow into the gaps, smoothing his hands around it while Ludus did his best not to jiggle the ball too much. He couldn't stop giggling as Worm Money salvaged the top heavy boulder and applied the adhesive glue that would bring their creations to life.

Ludus's was a little lopsided, but its heart was in the right place. And Worm Money's chest was comically small by comparison.

"Dummy thicc," Ludus whispered.

"Be nice to him," Worm Money replied.

"It's a compliment, I swear."

They made a pair of heads, both too small proportionally, but the two of them laughed enough where giving it any more thought would result in fresh peals. Ludus attached round ears to his snowcrock, and Worm Money made two tall ears with furry bases that really looked like one big ear. He used his finger to etch a more clearly defined line between them, but it didn't help that much.

When they were finished, they took a few steps back to admire their handiwork. Two lopsided snowcrooks growing taller and taller as the snow fell; one with a giant butt and a proportionally sizeable chest, and one with a giant butt and a proportionally small one. Two peas in a pod.

"We might have done something wrong," Worm Money said, his voice oddly serious.

"Yeah," Ludus chirped back. "Wait right here."

He ran to the edge of the wooded area, where no one bothered to go because it was supposedly tpart of the neighbor's yard, but Ludus knew the truth. He grabbed a few spindly sticks and trotted back with them.

"They need arms," Ludus said. "And maybe some stick tendrils?"

Worm Money jabbed the sticks in so one arm went for a high five, to which Ludus happily jammed his stick in as to not leave the snowcrock

hanging. They weren't quite long enough, but from a distance it looked close enough.

"Okay, now we're done."

"Yeah," Worm Money breathed, the air frosty. His cheeks were visibly darker. "Now it's time for hot chocolate."

"Yes, reason number four. Can't forget that."

They waded back to the porch, where Hacksaw still sat, watching them with his true eyes while the clusters returned from their aimless wandering. A cluster of small snowcrooks sat in a line in front of him, and he made no comment about how their larger counterparts looked from a distance.

When Worm Money glanced back at the pair, his face fell in horror. Up close, it had looked kinda off, the ears sitting too close together, but he thought that careving an obvious separation would be enough to make up for the weird positioning.

"Ludo," he said, pointing to the snowcrooks. "Why didn't you tell me his ears looked so bad from afar?"

Ludus gave him a wide smile. "Because I thought it would be funny."

And it was. Very funny indeed.