

Part Four
Halloween, 1975

An old chocolate frog trading card.



"D'you know," James says, tugging at the white curls sprouting from beneath his nostrils for the umpteenth time, "it's a marvel old Dumbledore gets anything done with all the itching and the tangling and the getting caught on things."

"Well, maybe he uses something other than spirit gum to keep his whiskers on," Sirius suggests. "Also, you know, he is Ageless and Wise. These may be obstacles he's learned to master. Hurry up, lad, we're going to be late for our own party."

"Well, whatever. I am trying, you know. This is -- ah -- ah--" James sneezes emphatically. He sniffs, wipes his nose on the elaborate sleeve of his costume, and regards it with disgust. "I think maybe I'm allergic -- gnuhh."

"Well, if it makes you feel better, you look terribly handsome." Sirius favors his best friend with a winning smile, pulls down his immense hat and flutters his eyelashes. "I've always had a thing for older men."

"Oh my, Minerva," James says, in a passable imitation of Dumbledore's sparkling baritone, "I don't know that

that's appropriate intra-staff conversation." Sirius cackles lecherously and slaps his bum, and then--

"On the contrary," says a faintly amused and much richer version from in front of them. "I encourage all forms of flattery from my underlings."

Albus Dumbledore has an uncanny habit of appearing for the tail ends of the bawdiest conversations, or manages to be standing just behind you the minute you mention his name. Behind the half-moons of his glasses his eyes are very blue. James attempts to scoop his jaw up from the floor and hopes against hope that's another McGonagall costume and not actually McGonagall with her arm in the headmaster's.

The stern cough and well-concealed flicker of amusement signal the worst has, indeed, happened. "They do say," Professor McGonagall murmurs, "that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

James' eyes dart to Sirius. They've known each other for long enough to communicate wordlessly, eyebrow twitches, lip quirks, a flash of teeth, a nervous tug of the earlobe, a scratch to the side of the nose. To anyone else they're just fidgety boys. To James and Sirius they have just had a lengthy conversation extending far beyond their current dilemma.

James rubs underneath his nose, disturbing the silvery-white whiskers: *Don't do anything stupid, Sirius.*

Sirius scratches behind his ear: *What could possibly make things worse than right now?*

James presses his teeth to his lower lip, beard shifting ticklishly over his chest: *Just don't do anything stupid, Sirius, and don't say anything stupid, either.*

Sirius rearranges the spectacles on his nose, nudging them into a more severe resting place: *Sorry, it's as good as done already.*

James toys with the hem of his -- Dumbledore's -- robes: *Bugger.*

Sirius brushes his thumb against the corner of his mouth, back straightening to familiar, prim posture: *And how much firewhiskey d'you think we should sneak for later?*

James wrinkles his nose: *Better make it butterbeer.*

A cough from the motionless pair in front of them summons their attention forward again. Sirius flicks his fingers through the front of his hair: *Showtime.*

"Professor McGonagall!" he exclaims, bringing to bear all the warmth and suavity that his good breeding and fortunate genetics have given him, and trying to ignore the little edge of panic in his voice. "You know, I thought this night couldn't get any more beautiful, and then you stepped round that corner." There is an explosive little noise from James.

Minerva McGonagall regards him impassively over the top of her spectacles, but the side of her mouth twitches. "Mr. Black. This is -- I hardly know what to say."

"Say *I do*, Professor! I shall never give up until you accept me," Sirius cries. He has quite the nature for dramatics, dropping onto one knee and sweeping the battered black hat off his head. He's always been good at this, at wild theatricals and mad improvisation, things that would be impertinent and stupid from anyone else but that from him -- and he knows this, it isn't just conceit -- are charming and often mesmerizing. It's all to do with confidence, he reminds himself. "You are the only woman who has ever managed to hold my complete attention. I can't stop thinking about you, I can't eat, I can't sleep, I do nothing but pine and steal your clothing--"

"I was under the impression that I had never even held your *partial* attention for more than a half an hour." McGonagall raises her chin slightly, the corner of her severe mouth twitching more energetically than ever.

"Oh, no," Sirius breathes, rapturously. On an insane whim, he grabs her hand. McGonagall shoots a glare at Dumbledore, who shrugs. Always innocence beneath the faint smell of lemon. "Professor, if ever I seem distant in your class, I'm probably dreaming of our future life together: frolicking by the ocean in the sands of Tahiti, skiing hand-in-hand down the mighty Alps, feeding adorable orphans in the slums of Bombay--"

"The resemblance is absolutely breathtaking," says Dumbledore, and Sirius notices with a faint glow of triumph that his shoulders are shaking. "Really, Minerva, it's like watching you be propositioned by your own twin."

"Well, I'm hardly observing any kind of effort from your evil doppelganger," says McGonagall, who now -- to Sirius's delight -- has a pink blush staining the tops of her cheeks. "Really, it's like he doesn't even care."

"My counterpart," James sighs, most gravely, "has already used every poetic turn of phrase the book has to offer! How can I, choking upon my own beard, hope to compete with his protestations of love undying until the end of time?" Dumbledore makes a sound like choking. "But!" James continues, "the war is not over, even if the battle is done!" Falling to his knees, praying to whatever gods of mischief might actually give a Bundimun that he doesn't trip over the troublesome beard, his eyes focus, myopic and wildly passionate, upon Dumbledore's chuckling face. The reaction is one of surprise, shock, truly divine, from all witnesses. A crowd is gathering, which only fuels each action, the next more ludicrous than the one before. "I am all confused, Headmaster -- it is like looking into a mirror --"

"Loves to do that, you know," Sirius explains in a stage whisper. "Does it all the time. Like heaven for him, heaven on earth--"

"-- and seeing for the first time the truth!" James clasps his hands to his chest, nearly loses them in the tangle of white hair, but manages to extricate them with innate dignity. "We had no other way than to put all our eggs in one basket--"

"And aren't we handsome? What you said, about the sincerest form of flattery." Sirius bats his lashes.

"--and hope that our desperation would not go unnoticed!"

Professor McGonagall bites back a snort of laughter that threatens to shatter her calm like the glaze over a crème brulee. Dumbledore's cheeks are rosy with suppressed amusement. "I was not aware," he murmurs, the calmest poker face of them all despite the ever-present twinkle in his eye, "that we taught play-acting in our institution."

"Oh no, Professors," James protests. "We are in earnest!"

"We are so in earnest that it is very *painful*," Sirius agrees.

"*Painfully earnest*," James confirms. "In fact we'd best have off from classes Monday to recover."

Sirius elbows him violently, eyes straight ahead: *Don't push it*. James pokes out his tongue as discreetly as possible.

The professors look at each other.

"How painful, exactly, would you classify your earnestness?" Dumbledore inquires archly. "I ask merely to ascertain whether we should release you without charges or have you locked up for your own good."

"Painful enough to merit euthanasia?" McGonagall mutters, and the Headmaster treads serenely on her foot. The onlookers cackle, and Sirius spares a moment to wish them dead before barreling on.

"Oh, terribly painful," he says, very sincerely. "Like -- like having one's foot gnawed off by a flobberworm. But of course, no physical pain, no description I could conjure could possibly compare to the, er, the pangs of the love that I know can never be--" He springs to his feet, still clutching McGonagall's hand, hoping that the movement will catapult him into inspiration. "For--painful though it is, to beg the favor of a woman who could never deign to love me in return, 'tis better to have loved and lost, er, and so on--" He fumbles, opens his mouth, closes it -- James is eyeing him in slowly growing panic, *come on, Padfoot, do something!* -- and finally thinks *to hell with it*.

Sirius launches himself forward, and kisses his Head of House full on the mouth.

McGonagall makes a strangled noise and flails at him. Their hats knock together. So do their spectacles. Sirius decides after a panic-filled moment that his point is made perhaps too well, yanks himself back, and gazes ardently at her. She looks, he thinks with great admiration, rather magnificent: bright red, helpless with confusion and probably rage, and yet altogether in possession of her dignity. "I'm sorry, Professor! I just -- couldn't hold back any longer! I love you! And it tears me up inside!" Considering the Deed Done, Sirius grabs James's wrist and flees down the hall, pursued by roars of laughter and a shriek of "Mister Black! *Twelve million points* from Gryffindor!" floating down the corridor after them.

"I heard you and Professor McGonagall shared a most passionate embrace." Remus is wearing a towel. No. A sheet? And there are leaves in his hair. Or something. "I've heard all about your escapades -- they're all over the school, you know; marriage proposals and histrionics and madcaps and the like -- that you launched yourself at her like a lamprey and near on sucked her face off -- well, sucked her face off her *face*." Remus adjusts the leaves curled against his ears. They're drooping.

"And you went down on one knee in front of Dumbledore, James," Peter chimes in. His voice is muffled behind another white sheet, draped lumpily over him, two eyeholes revealing Peter's blinking, awe-filled eyes. "How'd

you do it? How'd you *do* it?"

"*Why* did you do it?" Remus revises. He's wearing sandals, as well, brown and strappy over his fidgeting feet.

"Elementary, my dear Moony," James replies. He smoothes his moustache casually.

"You just love doing that, don't you." Sirius shakes his head. "Dirty moustache-stroker. Don't get used to it. Facial hair isn't a good look for you."

"He says that because it hides my lovely face," James whispers loudly.

"You're such an idiot. Anyway." Sirius turns his attention to Peter and Remus, who are regarding him with a mix of admiration and horror, respectively. "Of course, there's a full and very reasonable explanation that mostly does not involve me being drunk. Don't look at me like that! She's really a terribly attractive woman, you know, for her age."

"I was so afraid I was going to have to do it to Dumbledore, just to keep up," James says. "Overachieving wanker."

"Well, it worked! We didn't get detention, did we?"

"No, we only got twelve million points!"

"That's ridiculous, we don't even have twelve million points. She's bluffing. To hide her love. Moony, are you meant to be cupid?"

"Don't be silly, he's a wood-nymph," James cuts in, smiling reasonably at Remus. "Aren't you?"

"Er," Remus says.

James frowns. "Guess you're not a wood-nymph, then?"

"No."

"Or cupid?" Sirius asks, hopeful.

"No."

"I already guessed cupid," Peter explains. "But he's not cupid. He's not Zeus, either, and he's not blanket-man -- though I thought that one was a little farfetched to begin with." Somewhere beneath his own sheet, Peter is chewing his lower lip. "And he isn't Julius Caesar and he isn't about to flash any of us, either, so don't ask."

"Of course he's not about to flash us." Sirius grins. "It's *Moony*."

"To save you all the endless heartache," Remus begins, "I'm--"

"No, no, you absolutely *cannot* tell," Sirius insists. "I won't allow it."

"It's obviously hopeless." Remus folds scarred arms over his chest. One scar runs the length of his forearm from elbow to pinky; three short horizontal lines, old, cuff his wrist. "I should have just gone with Ghost Number Two."

"Uhm, hold on, what was that bloke's name?"

"Come on." James nudges Sirius with his elbow. "Or there won't be anything left at the feast. And *I* wasn't the one delayed by endangering McGonagall's reputation."

"This doesn't mean I give up!" Sirius grabs Remus by the hand and Peter by the ghost flap. "I'm still guessing!"

"Hm," Remus mutters.

"I've got it!" Sirius says around a mouthful of butterbeer. Remus ducks just in time. "Me last week after I ran out of towels!"

"No," Remus says.

"Good one, though," Peter encourages. "Don't give up now."

"No, really, Moony, *this* time, I've got it." Sirius blows a bubble the size of his head and green like the back of a luna moth. When it pops and sticks all over his neatly perched glasses he manages, "That bloke who said Eureka!"

"That was Euclid." Sirius gets the feeling the only reason Remus hasn't throttled him is all the chocolate is placating him. "Euclid did not wear a toga."

"Bugger," Sirius says.

"Me when I'm drunk? I've done some pretty arse--"

"No."

"I could swear I was like that one time when I--"

"No."

"I'm not giving up." Sirius tries to look nonchalant while glancing eagerly out the window. James is rearranging his beard somewhere and Peter has gone off to be sick in the bathroom and it's almost time to head off to the Shack for the night -- a yearly ritual, and therefore Holy. Already the clouds are the spectral Hallow's Eve color, yellow and gray and silver and shifting across darkness into darkness.

"Of course not, no." Remus reaches up to settle his leaves more neatly behind his ears.

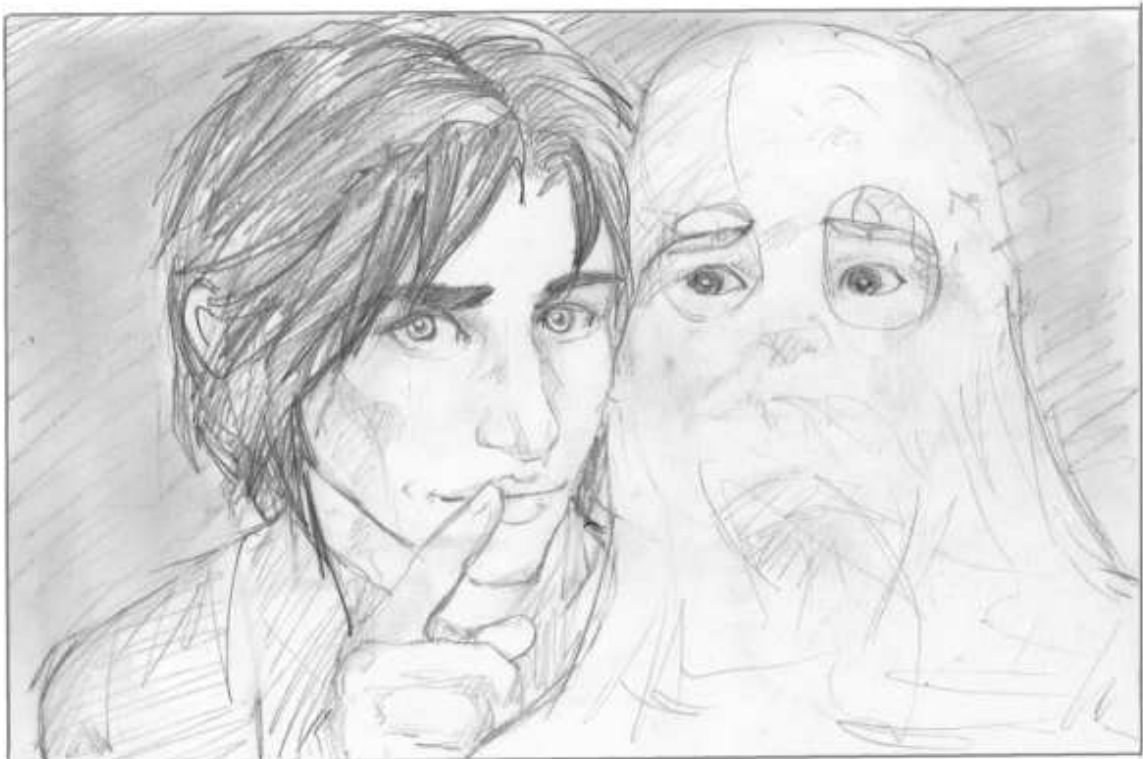
"It's on the tip of my tongue," Sirius insists.

"So's some of that gum from earlier." Remus motions with his thumb and Sirius sucks it off hurriedly.

"Just so long as you don't tell me."

"You have until morning." Remus smiles the grim smile of a much-beleaguered entity.

"Bugger," Sirius says.





The Shrieking Shack is always cold, but on this frigid October night Peter, wrapped only in a blanket and the sheet from his costume, feels somehow warmed, and it's only partly to do with the enormous quantities of sweets and butterbeer that the four of them have consumed. He's had a good day, and he's grateful to them for it. Stuffed with chocolate and various permutations thereof, it is hard to muster up the requisite All Souls' Day chill, but they are doing their best, and Peter wants to help them in thanks for their friendship.

"Ooh, I've got a good one!"

"Is it the one about the nearly-headless ghost, because that one *isn't good*, Wormtail."

"Shut up. This is a good one. It's about--"

"Don't tell us what it's about! Just tell us the story."

"Righto. So once upon a--a dark and stormy night--this little kid named, er, Mark. His Mum says to him, 'Mark, go down to the butchers' and get us a shrake's liver for our, um, our liver, that we're having for supper tonight.'"

"Eww, shrake's liver? What kind of a mother *is* this woman?"

"I *like* shrake's liver."

"Yes, well, you are a Dark, Inhuman Creature. Who knows what-all you like?"

"You know, I do find myself developing a strange craving for human flesh."

"Shut up and listen to the story! You two have no respect. Honestly, *canines*."

"So--so down she goes. He goes. He goes to the butcher's, and there's the liver. Oh wait, his mum's only given him seven sickles, I forgot that bit. So he goes up and he says, 'How much is the shrake's liver?' And the butcher says 'It's seven sickles, but we've also got all these pumpkin pastries on sale for seven sickles as well.'"

"Why is the butcher selling pumpkin pastries?"

"His wife makes them. Anyway so Mark goes, well, all right! Because he loves pastries. So he buys them with the money, and he starts home. Then just as he's leaving, he remembers that his mum asked him for a liver!"

"He *knew* that though, right? I mean, he was just *asking* about the price of shrake's liver, presumably he knew he was supposed to buy shrake's liver."

"He was forgetful, Sirius, do shut up."

"Yeah, shut up. Anyway, luckily at this point he passes an undertaker's. And--um--outside the undertaker's, there's an open coffin with an old witch inside."

"Eurgh!"

"In the sun and everything?"

"Is it kind of like a pub sign? Corpses Within, style of thing?"

"No! No, it's just, um, a sample."

"A sample? A sample *corpse*?"

"It's a Muggle undertaker! I don't know. Anyway just then Mark has a brilliant idea. So he gets out his wand and he cuts out the old lady's liver."

"*Ewww*."

"Wormtail, this is a vile story."

"But exciting! ...In a cannibal kind of way. Stop looking at me like that!"

"Anyway, um, he cuts out the liver and takes it home, and his mum fries it up for dinner. And it's the most delicious thing they've ever eaten."

"And yet they don't suspect it's not shrike's liver?"

"He *knows* it's not shrike's liver, idiot, he just stole it."

"But you said he's forgetful!"

"You lot are the worst audience in the world. They eat it up and then the sun sets."

"Because they ate the liver?"

"No! Because it's *night time*! The sun goes down and Mark and his mum go to bed. And then they wake up. He wakes up. And he hears this thumping. Thump, thump, thump. Oh no wait! No he doesn't. He hears a voice from outside, and it says: 'Mark. Maaaaaark! I'm outside! I want my liver baaaaaack!'"

"It's a *talking shrike*!"

"Sirius, you are not allowed to talk anymore."

"Please, you two--"

"--So! So Mark is terrified, obviously, so he runs and hides in the closet, yelling for his Mum, but there's no

answer. So he's hiding there in the dark--*who's breathing like that?!*"

"*Moo ha ha ha ha ha ha.*"

"Fuck off, Sirius! You aren't funny at all. Anyway so as he's hiding there and he hears a creeeeeak and then the same voice says 'Mark, Maaaaark! I'm inside! I want my liver baaaack!' He totally freezes. Not even breathing. Not moving at all. And then, now's when he hears: Thump. Thump. Thump.

"And the voice goes 'Mark, Maaaaark! I can see you! *I want my liver back! And the door to the cupboard is flung open!*'"

"*Sweet Jesus augh--!*"

"What? *What?! James??*"

"I could swear I just felt something--claws--"

"*Moo ha ha ha ha ha ha.*"

"Sod off, Sirius! God. I almost had a coronary."

"What's outside the cupboard?"

"Well, *no one knows*, but when the neighbors came in the next day, they found the bodies of Mark and his mum, and they both had their *stomachs and livers torn out.*"

"Oooh."

"Lovely."

"That's a nice one, Wormtail."

"But so wait, actually we *do* know what it was, right? I mean, it was the old lady."

"Black, you are determined to ruin everything!"

"I think he should be beaten."

"Too right he should. Pillow, Mr. Prongs?"

"Thank you very much, Mr. Wormtail."

"No, no! Not the costume! My stockings'll get runs in--*oooh noooooo--*"

"*Moo ha ha ha ha ha.*"

On the white folds of fabric tugging across Remus' lap the book rests, a permanent fixture of his life. The title is worn away with age and time and the binding cracked. He has his right pointer finger stuck into the center to keep the page. Just below where his thumb rests the rubbed away lettering is just legible. *Poe*. It is one of Remus' irrational life long dreams to read Poe to his friends while they are actually paying attention.

" Argh, get off, you've beaten me, all right? You win. Ow. All right, Remus. S'your turn."

"D'you have one of those Muggle stories again?"

"Those aren't scary 't all, Muggle stories are never as scary as Wizarding ones."

"I don't *have* to read it, you know."

"Well, you know, I was only saying."

"Go on, Moony, read it."

"Only if you're sure it won't *bore* you."

"C'mon, Remus, you know what I meant."

"Well. All right. *The Telltale Heart*, by Edgar Alan Poe."

"Didn't he write that Raven poem? Nevermore, and all."

"Shh."

"Right, sorry."

"True! -- nervous -- very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses -- not destroyed -- not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily -- how calmly I can tell you the whole story."

"Doesn't sound calm to me."

"Put a sock in it, Sirius."

"Sock. In. Put. Go on, Moony."

"It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never

given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture - a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees -- very gradually -- I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever."

"Sounds like that -- right, you remember, don't you Prongs -- that Moody fello--mmph."

"Handy sock."

"Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded -- with what caution -- with what foresight -- with what dissimulation I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it -- oh so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly -- very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha! would a madman have been so wise as this? And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously -- oh, so cautiously -- cautiously (for the hinges creaked) -- I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. And this I did for seven long nights -- every night just at midnight -- but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he has passed the night. So you see he would have been a very profound old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept."

"So what happened then?"

"Well he's *telling* us, isn't he, Peter?"

"He's telling us about a mad stalker is what he's telling us."

"What he's *trying* to tell us."

"Upon the eighth night I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. A watch's minute hand moves more quickly than did mine. Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers -- of my sagacity. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts."

"You know what that means. -- Ow! That hurt!"

"I fairly chuckled at the idea; and perhaps he heard me; for he moved on the bed suddenly, as if startled. Now you may think that I drew back -- but no. His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness, (for the shutters were close fastened, through fear of robbers,) and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it on steadily, steadily. I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in bed, crying out -- 'Who's there?' I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed listening; -- just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the

death watches in the wall."

"What's a death watch in the wall?"

"Shh!"

"You're one to talk, Sirius."

"Well, it's interesting now."

"Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief -- oh, no! -- it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me."

"He's batty."

"You can say *that* again."

"I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself -- 'It is nothing but the wind in the chimney -- it is only a mouse crossing the floor,' or 'It is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp.'"

"I know how that feels -- Ow! Stop throwing that!"

"Yes, he had been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions: but he had found all in vain. All in vain; because Death, in approaching him had stalked with his black shadow before him, and enveloped the victim. And it was the mournful influence of the unperceived shadow that caused him to feel --although he neither saw nor heard -- to feel the presence of my head within the room."

"Ooh."

"When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little -- a very, very little crevice in the lantern. So I opened it -- you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily -- until, at length a simple dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell full upon the vulture eye. It was open -- wide, wide open -- and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect distinctness -- all a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones; but I could see nothing else of the old man's face or person: for I had directed the ray as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot. And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the sense? -- now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew that sound well, too. It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage."

"Definitely Mad Old Moody; this Poe fellow must've known him."

"But even yet I refrained and kept still. I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eve. Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old man's terror must have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment! -- do you mark me well I have told you that I am nervous: so I am. And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me -- the sound would be heard by a neighbour! The old man's hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once -- once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more."

"Couldn't do that to Moody though, could you."

"If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs. I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye -- not even his -- could have detected any thing wrong. There was nothing to wash out -- no stain of any kind -- no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all -- ha! ha! When I had made an end of these labors, it was four o'clock -- still dark as midnight. As the bell sounded the hour, there came a knocking at the street door. I went down to open it with a light heart, -- for what had I now to fear? There entered three men, who introduced themselves, with perfect suavity, as officers of the police. A shriek had been heard by a neighbour during the night; suspicion of foul play had been aroused; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed to search the premises. I smiled, -- for what had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search -- search well. I led them, at length, to his chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim.

"The officers were satisfied. My manner had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted of familiar things. But, ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears: but still they sat and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct: -- It continued and became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definiteness -- until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears. No doubt I now grew very pale; -- but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased -- and what could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound -- much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I gasped for breath -- and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly -- more vehemently; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased. Why would they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if

excited to fury by the observations of the men -- but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! what could I do? I foamed -- I raved -- I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder -- louder -- louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! -- no, no! They heard! -- they suspected! -- they knew! -- they were making a mockery of my horror! -- this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! and now -- again! -- hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!

"Villains!" I shrieked, 'dissemble no more! I admit the deed! -- tear up the planks! here, here! -- It is the beating of his hideous heart!"

"Wow."

"Yeah."

"Better than the Raven poem."

"Oh, yes."

Sirius shivers happily and sprawls his legs carelessly apart, heedless of the skirt. This has got to be his favorite holiday that doesn't involve mistletoe. He and James have had a good run today, and if there's a way to finish it off with a bang, he's going to make sure it happens. There's a chill in the air, their little lanterns are flickering, and the wind skims the wires of the piano. He rubs his arms reflexively for warmth but grins widely, leaning in toward them so that the firelight glows menacingly in the hollows of his face.

"All right, it's me now. *Moo ha ha--*"

"Stop that."

"--Sorry."

"Oh, I suppose you can go, if you must."

"You won't regret it. --So there's this gorgeous girl, right. And she lives with her parents in oh, say, I don't know, let's say Surrey."

"Evans lives in Surrey!"

"I *know* that, idiot. So this girl, right, this lovely redhead, she lives in Surrey with her parents and her nasty little baby sister and her big black dog, who is her best and favorite companion and with whom she snuggles up to sleep every night, cuddling against him in flimsy nightwear and stroking his big old fuzzy head--"

"Fuck you, Black."

"What? Don't get shirty, Potter, it's only a story. What's the matter, are you *frightened*?"

"No, but *you* should be--"

"Oho! Someone's not getting into the Halloween spirit!"

"And someone else isn't getting into *anything* unless it's a *bruising*--"

"Honestly, the pair of you. I want to hear the story. Sirius?"

"Sorry."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Moony, it's nice to know that someone around here still has some respect for the lost art of storytelling. --Where was I? Right, so, this girl, and her dog--"

"You *said* that bit, about twelve separate times--"

"--so this one evening her parents decide to go out for the night, okay, and so they leave this helpless, beautiful girl, sixteen years old, alone in the house with her horrible little baby sister. They figure it's all right, because she's got this bloody great dog around to protect her from whatever, and so they just remind her to lock all the doors before she goes to sleep.

"So out they go, and the girl goes round the house to get all the doors and windows, and she locks them all up, except there's one in the cellar that won't shut. She's not too worried though, as it's in the cellar and all."

"Why doesn't she just charm it shut?"

"Must you ask stupid questions? She's not allowed to do magic outside of school! She's a *prefect*! It could be extremely damaging! The point is so she goes back upstairs, has a bit of supper, and changes into her nightie, which is very short and terribly flattering, and she curls up on the sofa to go to bed, her slender fingers lightly caressing the dog in its favorite place right between the ears--"

"Don't you even *dare* talk about Evans like that!"

"James, will you please have some dignity? Put that thing away, you'll have someone's eye out. This isn't *about* Evans. It's a Folklore."

"Prongs, you're ruining his story!"

"You are, you know, James. But Sirius, I don't think you can say something is 'a folklore,' and you have to admit you're being somewhat gratuitous."

"For God's sake, Moony, is anyone going to let me tell this story?"

"I haven't said *anything*!"

"And for that I am profoundly grateful, Wormtail. When the revolution comes, you will not be eaten. May I go on?"

"Fine, don't let me stop you, you great canine pervert."

"*Thank* you. All right. So she drifts off into a peaceful sleep, right. And then about two hours later, she wakes up to hear something coming from the bathroom: *drip. Drip. Drip.*"

"I know what *that* is!"

"You're a sick man, Peter Pettigrew."

"I meant the tap!"

"Will you lot shut *up*? So she hears this noise, right. But it's dark, it's about two on the morning, and she doesn't want to get up, she's a bit frightened--anyway she figures, as our clever Peter has, that it's just the tap leaking, as it does, because this imaginary redheaded girl is not as good in Domestic Charms as she is in all her other subjects. So she just kind of wants reassurance, so she sticks her hand over the side of the bed to pet her dog, and it gives her hand a nice, reassuring lick, because it is a Good Dog."

"Padfoot, you are foul and disgusting."

"This is *not about me*, James Potter, how many times do I have to tell you? Honestly, Moony, can we bury *him* in the floor?"

"No."

"Why can't you all be quiet? We'll never get to my story like this!"

"The rat has a point. Why *can't* you all be quiet? Except Moony, who has kindly refrained from correcting my grammar for at least thirty percent of this story and again, my gratitude is boundless."

"I've not said one *word* about your grammar."

"You said I was 'gratuitous.'"

"That has nothing to do with grammar! Do you even know what it means?"

"Shh!"

"Of course I do. Anyway! So. Reassured by her loyal pet, she goes back to sleep. She dozes for a while, and then suddenly she's awakened again: *drip. Drip. Drip.* And this time there's another noise: a sound like claws on wood. *Skritch. Skirrrrrriiitch.* "

"She's a little bit more frightened now, so she kind of sits up, but it's so dark in the house and she's too scared and groggy to get out of bed, so again she puts her hand down for reassurance. And the dog licks it, all protective and sweet, and, comforted, she falls back asleep.

"Then suddenly she's awoken *again*. This time the dripping is insistent and the clawing noise is so loud it sounds like it's inside her head. She's terrified, man. So she reaches out her hand, but the dog isn't there. *Righto*, she thinks, I'll just go look at it, it's only a drippy tap."

"It's not a drippy tap, is it."

"Shh!"

"Shut up, Peter--"

"So she goes into the bathroom. It's too dark to see anything. Trembling, she reaches for the light, and she fumbles around and finally gets it on. The first thing she sees is her dog, tied up inside the towel cupboard, scratching frantically at the door. *Skritch. Skrrriiitch.*"

"How is it scratching if it's tied up?"

"Potter, I will *kill* you. It just *is*. Christ. So there's the dog, scratching and struggling, and the girl starts to panic. So she turns round. Slowly. And there, hanging from the curtain rod, is the mutilated body of her sister, dripping blood onto the floor. *Drip. Drip. Drip.* And on the wall of the shower, written in blood, she sees: *Humans can lick too, my lovely.*"

"Ugh."

"Phwoar, *brilliant!*"

"Thanks, Pete."

"Bloody disgusting."

"Nonce."

"You *would* think so, Prongs, just because it's about Evans getting licked--ugh, that's disgusting."

"Don't be such a nonce, Wormtail, and anyway, remember, it's not about Evans!"

"You know, Pads, at first I thought the dog was your little avatar in this story, but now I'm starting to think that maybe you're the murderer."

"I am not! Good God, Moony, what are you insinuating?"

"You're just--also inordinately fond of licking people. You *are*, you know!"

"Not helpless sixteen year old girls! -- Well, actually. But not while pretending to be a dog! --Well, actually--"

"You know, in the version I know, the murderer *kills* the dog. Skins it alive actually. That's the dripping. And there isn't a sister."

"Look, Prongs, it's a little thing I like to call Artistic License. If you don't like it, tell your own bloody story."

"Fine! Maybe I will."

"Go on, then."

James toys with the end of his long white beard while managing to lounge in his heavy purple robes. Behind him the rickety bedframe creaks back and forth in the howling Hallowe'en wind. He and Sirius detonated seventeen dungbombs at breakfast alone, and thirteen of them -- an aptly unlucky number -- in Snape's socks. The last challenge of the evening is his story before, stuffed on Pumpkin Pie and too much candy to contemplate, their lanterns snuff out and their dreams divide them.

"Yeah, what've you got for us, James?"

"More beating hearts and Moody eyes and batty Poe-people?"

"**The Telltale Heart** is a *classic*, Sirius."

"Pfshh--Ow!"

"You're just scoffing 'cause you nearly wet down your leg. I saw you."

"I did not!"

"You did *too*."

"You're just as nutty as Poe."

"It's a *classic*!"

"You know what's also a classic? **The Clabbert's Paw**."

"Ooh."

"Once upon a time--"

"No, that's not right. You can't start a ghost story with 'Once upon a time.'"

"All right then, once upon a stormy night, how's that for you?"

"Much better."

"Once upon a stormy night for Sirius' sake, when a family was just setting down to dinner, there came a knock upon the door. 'Will you get it mother?' the old man who was head of the house by the way asked his wife. 'I'll get it,' their only son said, light of their hearts, delight of their home, et cetera. He opened the door and there in the doorway stood a weary, grizzled old soldier, wet with the rain and tired with all the traveling he had been doing what with being a soldier and all."

"This isn't scary."

"Well not *yet* so just be quiet and let me tell the story."

"But you're telling it wrong."

"You've had your turn."

"Fine, fine, ruin a perfectly good Clabbert's Paw, go ahead."

"*So* the family invited the poor tired soldier in for dinner and a few drinks afterwards. The soldier was fond of his firewhiskey, just like you Sirius, ha, and after the third glass he warmed up a bit in eye and in story and on the fourth drink took from his pocket something wrapped up in a handkerchief. 'D'you see this?' he said, holding it up in the candlelight. 'What is it?' asked the son. The soldier unwrapped it and let fall to the table a grizzled mangy old Clabbert's paw mangled from where it had been cut off many many years ago, though the blood, it still looked *fresh*. The old woman gasped and the son was nat'rally fascinated because it was spiffing cool and the old man couldn't help but see the glint of its dangerous nails and leaned in a bit closer, as if drawn to it by its curling wicked fingers."

"Get on with it, the Clabbert's paw, ugly, bloody, right."

"*So* the soldier told them that it wasn't just any Clabbert's paw but one that had been charmed once, long ago, to give three people three wishes each. 'It was to test the nature of fate,' the soldier said, 'to see if man could change his own without sending him down the path to destruction.' 'But how do you know all this?' the old woman asked, having recovered valiantly. 'Because, madam,' the soldier replied, 'I am the second person to have had his three wishes.' 'And did it ruin your life, sir?' the old man asked. 'I will tell you honestly,' the soldier replied, 'that I wish I had never laid eyes upon this ugly, bloody Clabbert's paw.'"

"There it is, ugly and bloody agai-- Ow!"

"*So* before the soldier left late that night he said to the old man, 'Thank you for your hospitality, good sir. I saw the way you were drawn to the paw over the table. It means, despite your kindness, I must give this Clabbert's paw, along with its last three wishes, to you.' The old man was surprised and nervous but secretly delighted;

three whole wishes could help his little hut and his failing broomstick business and he wouldn't fall prey to his fate like the other two. Besides, he told himself, the soldier was still alive, wasn't he? And he looked fit as a Frisbee and all that. However he decided to ask his wife and his son what they thought about using the wish. 'We could use it for something very small,' the son suggested, 'just enough to clear us of our debts wouldn't be too much to ask for, and wouldn't we all be happy then?' The old man was delighted with his son's cleverness--

"--what was he doing living with his parents still, eh, a fine strapping young lad like that?"

"--delighted with his son's cleverness and so he did exactly as his son suggested. 'I wish for three hundred galleons to clear us of our debts,' he told the Clabbert's paw. But nothing happened."

"Talking to a Clabbert's paw'll do that to a man."

"The next morning there was still no money. The old man shrugged, and wondered if perhaps the old soldier had been mistaken in how many people had used the paw before him. He put the paw in his bedside drawer and went down to breakfast."

"What was he having?"

"Porridge."

"Disgusting. Should've wished for some eggs and bacon."

"Later that day some grave looking wizards in dark robes showed up at the house. The old woman let them in, a sinking feeling deep in her stomach. 'It's your son,' the grave wizards said. 'There's been an accident. We claim no responsibility, but please accept this small sum of three hundred galleons and our condolences to keep the matter quiet.'"

"Oh-*ho*, now that's uncanny."

"So the old man and the old woman went into a long period of mourning, spending all the money on a grand funeral for their son which is really ridiculous to me because he's dead anyway, isn't he, what do they need a shiny coffin for if they're putting it in the ground?"

"Now you're talking sense, Prongs."

"The days passed into weeks and the weeks into months as weeks do and one night, after crying for hours upon her pillow, the old woman sat up straight in bed. 'Husband,' she said, 'Husband, I have an idea!' She scrabbled through the bedside drawer and pulled out the Clabbert's paw, which was uglier and fouler and more twisted than ever. 'I wish for our son back,' she said, 'I wish for our son to come back to us!' The old man was horrified. He knew immediately that, in her grief, his wife had been very non-specific and thought instantly of their son -- rotted and falling to pieces and with bits of shiny coffin hanging off him too -- walking up the lane and smashing the door in. Still, for a time, nothing happened and they could hear nothing in the darkness but the sound of their own breathing. Just as the old man was finally relaxing the wind shifted and the clouds ran over the moon and, as an owl began to hoot in a tree outside their window just like crying, they heard it: the sound of footsteps scraping down the road, lifted high in the stillness of the night. The old woman leaped out of bed and

ran towards the door, struggling with the locks and the bolt. The old man could do nothing but sit in his bed and clutch at his covers and shudder and he saw just out the window a disfigured shape stumbling down the road, falling, reaching out, stumbling, grasping with bony fingers and getting closer and closer and closer."

"And closer and closer and closer."

"So the old woman screamed from downstairs 'Husband, help me with the bolt! I can hardly reach it!' but the old man couldn't move, the Clabbert's paw clasped tightly in his hands. What was he to do? The rotted monster that was his son was about to be let in and his wife was downstairs lifting the bolt with all her might and there he was helpless in his bed, rigid with terror and so on, until he realized: *the paw had one more wish left*. Holding the paw high above his head he cried out, 'I wish my son were back in the grave!' just as the old woman threw up the bolt and pulled open the door and--"

"And?"

"And?"

"--and there was nothing outside but the falling leaves rattling at the door."



Sirius lies totally still, staring sightlessly into the dark, shadowy peak of the Shack's ceiling. He can't move. It's not an issue of comfort, it's an issue of Things that are Waiting in all the hidden corners, horrible hulking dead Things that are just drooling for him to expose a foot or a finger so that they can strip the flesh from his bones and--

Thump.

Sirius sits bolt upright, clutching his sheet. The wind whistles eerily through the cracks in the wooden wall. It's never been this dark ever, anywhere, in the history of the world, Sirius thinks.

Thump.

"Prongs!" hisses Sirius as quietly as possible, jabbing a thumb into the hulk of cloth that he hopes -- *oh my God, oh my God* -- is still James. "Oi, Prongs! Proooooongs. Are you awake?"

James lets out a phenomenal snort and flops onto his back, breathing noisily through his nose like a death rattle. Snoring, at a time like this. Completely oblivious to Doom, which even now *thumps* closer. Sirius curses and crawls back into his defensive position, gnawing convulsively on his thumbnail. James sleeps like the dead (*oh my God oh my God*); there'll be no waking him at this particular stage. On other occasions, Sirius has tried everything, up to and including judicious application of saliva, but it's no use when James is snoring like that.

Thump.

"Christ!" Sirius launches himself frantically at his last hope, which is Remus, huddled comfortably against the far wall. "Moony! Moony! You awake? Moony?"

"nghf," says the bundle, muffledly. "Go 'way."

"No," says Sirius. "Something is Thumping. Wake up. Moony. Moony Moony Moony."

Thump.

Remus groans low and long and rolls over onto his side. His face comes out of the carnivorous shadows into a brief slant of moonlight. Sirius is relieved to see Remus' nose, mouth, cheekbones and chin are all still in tact. Nothing has eaten him. Nothing has eaten him *yet*. Remus rubs blearily at his eyes. "S'the matter?" he asks. "Time is it?"

"I don't know." Sirius grasps him by the shoulders. "Listen, Moony, you've got to just -- shh! Be quiet! -- and listen."

"But what's going--" Sirius clamps his hand over Remus' mouth.

"Wait for it," he mouths.

The silence stretches infuriatingly across the room. It's taunting him, Sirius knows, teasing him, prolonging the agony of just waiting for it. Clouds shift over the moon. The sound of the Shack creaking back and forth on unstable foundations is less frightening than the silence it obscures, the silence buried deeper, the silence which is more unbearable the more it lasts. Sirius can hear his own heart pounding, and the steadier beat of Remus' heart against his forearm, just speeding up from the sloth of slumber.

Thump.

Sirius nearly jumps, the floorboards shaking beneath him. "There," he hisses. "Did you hear it? It's closer now. Moony, it's getting closer." He almost expects Remus to laugh at him, but instead Remus' eyes turn keen and narrow, pupils dilated. He looks wild and uncertain and on edge, predatory, or instinctive. This is a late-at-night Moony with his senses still blurred, his intuition still confused. This is a scenting-the-air Moony, who reminds Sirius it isn't always a boy he's friends with, infuriatingly proper and often too reasonable to do anything at all with. This is a sharp-faced Moony, the color of his eyes more gold than brown and the hard line of his cheek and his jaw pressed forward, scythe-pale in the Witching Hour.

"I hear it," Remus says.

Thump.

It's somewhere near Sirius' left leg now, as if it knows the way to win is to divide and conquer. It's going to come around from behind, Sirius realizes, and it's going to slip between Remus' leg and his own leg and it's going to get them both before they can warn one another. Outside a wolf howls. Remus' nose twitches.

Thump.

"I'm not frightened," Sirius insists, out loud, voice rough. "Are you?"

Thump.

"Remus, say something." It doesn't help to see Remus, stoic in his element, the brittle cut of his jaw to his ear, against his neck. Sirius wonders if Remus is afraid of anything but the moon and decides on *probably not*.

Thump.

"Is it the shrike's liver? Do shrike's livers thump?"

"I don't think so."

Thump.

"It can't be the Clabbert's Paw, that only had three people and the three wishes."

"Can't be."

Thump.

"Remus. Remus, it's the Telltale Heart. It's *your bloody Telltale Heart*, so *do* something!" Sirius clutches Remus' shoulder, almost feeling the brush of something nameless crawl up against his spine.

Thump.

It grabs the back of his robes with spindly fingers not a moment later. Sirius opens his mouth in a silent yowl, trying to leap free, but the hand is strong and holds firm, dragging him back to the floor. For a moment Sirius doesn't remember hearts don't have hands. "It's got me!" he groans. "Oh God, it's got me, with its fingers and -- wait a minute."

"Thump," Remus says.

Sirius considers this new development for precisely seven seconds, which is how long it takes for his heart to start beating again, and then says with deadly calm, "Lupin, you are about to learn the meaning of a thumping."

Remus cackles, slightly hysterically, and tries to wriggle away on his elbows, which is tragically inefficient to someone fleeing the mighty wrath of a Black. Sirius grabs him by the ankle, snarls, and launches himself forward to belt Remus round the ear, making the whole shack creak and shudder under them.

"Aghn," Remus says, "you nutter, you'll wake up everyone!"

"Good, then they'll get to see you die," Sirius says. "I bite you!"

He does.

Remus makes a noise of indignation, struggles up, and smacks the heel of his hand into Sirius's cheek. It'll be a glorious shining bruise by morning. With a great heave of his shoulders, Remus flips Sirius head over heels and straight into the rickety door. It bursts open, rocking on ancient hinges, and suddenly they're rolling out onto the landing. Sirius's knee smashes into the banister; Remus yanks at Sirius's hair. Sirius yelps and flips himself away, and then he abruptly remembers that they are at the top of the stairs.

There is a little moment of dread. They glance at each other; and then gravity, as it inevitably does, kicks in.

Thump thump thump thump thump.

At the bottom of the stairs Remus groans at the starry burst of pain in the back of his head. Sirius, sprawled heavy beneath him, lets out all the air in his lungs in one long *Ungh*. For a full minute they lie where they fell, taking inventory of each and every twisted muscle and smashed joint and smarting bone, the little scrapes of skin peeled off their shins, the cracks in their knuckles, the splinters in their rears. Slowly the Shack calms, swaying back and forth with almost melodic rhythm, the lullaby of an ancient spell.

"Am I as heavy as I feel?" Remus winces.

"Heavier," Sirius says.

"Do you have a splinter in your--"

"A whomping great one *right* in my," Sirius says. He shifts, trying to pull his arm free from where Remus' chest has it trapped, against the bottom step. "Ungh," he says again. "Unnngh." Remus finds himself rolling, reaching out a shaking arm to steady himself, splayed vertical over Sirius, splayed vertical. The smell of wood and candy and the faint tinge of somewhere-blood dances through the air.

"Erm," Sirius ventures after a time, having ascertained that he still has most of his limbs, although some of them are either numb or should be numb. "How do you know if you're paralyzed?"

"Well, for one thing, you can't move." Remus' voice is inches away and miles off. Sirius forces himself to breathe, pushing down the shaking in his diaphragm, and tries to shift again, at which the whomping great splinter digs gleefully into the back of his thigh.

"Gnnaaa!" he says, with feeling, and twists to yank at it. The draft that lifts and scatters the leaves across the rough floorboard nips at his ears, but over him drapes Remus, warm, still, a pressing-down that is both strangely heavy and strangely comfortable. He looks up and catches Remus' eyes, and for no reason his stomach twists hotly and he has to blink and catch his breath.

"I think it's not a splinter, I think it's my wand," he says rather hoarsely, making his voice as light as possible. "Can you -- er. Off?"

Remus pauses to contemplate. "Can I off?" he mutters, as if thinking aloud. "Think so," he decides finally, rolling to one side and hitting the floor with an *ooph* of breath and an *ooph* of dust. His face disappears into a cloud of shadow. Sirius can still hear him, breathing raspy and low, and remember the rise and fall of their chests unevenly together.

"One inch to the left," Sirius murmurs. His laugh is as half-hearted as the joke. There's little to laugh about when a chap can hardly move himself below the abdomen, he tells himself. That's why there's no laughter below the ache of pain and the other ache, intangible, elusive, nameless. He closes his fingers around his wand, pain tracing the lines of his veins all the way up his arm. "Broken anything?"

"Twisted my wrist, maybe."

"Let's have a look." Sirius drags himself forward, a dizzying moment of silence as he reorients his brain to new angle. Remus has his arm clasped against his chest, still lying flat, profile still in sharp relief of pale shadow against darker shadow. His fingers dangle unevenly against his elbow. He has the look of a wounded animal, something still and patient but ready to turn, wild and snapping. Sirius reaches out, slow, slow, and touches the back of Remus' hand. The back of Remus' hand has nothing to do with his wrist, starting to swell and fill out the skin around the bone.

"I'm fine," Remus says. "I'm fine."

"Bollocks," Sirius says sharply. "Can you even move your fingers?"

Remus manages a little gasp of laughter. "Er. To be honest, I don't really want to try. Maybe?"

Sirius hisses in sympathetic pain, catching his lower lip between his teeth. He splays out his fingers, soft against the papery skin of Remus' wrist, the small bones there and the delicate blue veins tracing out underneath. Remus feels the odd heat of his fingerprints, searing against the bruise. "It's twisted. We should get you back--"

"No," Remus says softly. "Wait."

Sirius pauses. Against Remus' throbbing wrist his heart beats through his hand. Remus closes his eyes. He can feel it, deep as the roots of trees uncoiling: his bones stretching and knitting together, twining, the crack and ache of healing. Sirius stares at him, uncomprehending.

"Werewolf thing," Remus says, trying to be easy, but his voice cracks a little in pain. "We don't -- ahh! -- we don't break very easily. And we heal fast." The last muffled crackle as the last small bone shunts itself into place. Remus breathes out, shaky and unsteady, and flexes his wrist, which is still angry red but hardly swollen at all.

Sirius blinks and shifts.

"Er," Remus says. "Fixed?"

"Whoa," Sirius says. His eyes are on Remus with strange, warm intensity; the lines of their bodies melt together like water. "I get it."

"What," Remus says, unnerved. "Get what?"

"You're Aristotle," Sirius explains. Remus' mouth works for a moment before Sirius starts laughing, low and rumbling and infectious, which means Remus starts laughing too, and then he's gasping for breath and Sirius is twitching like a beached fish, sobbing with laughter, and James and Peter appear at the top of the stairs, rubbing their eyes. With the sound of James yelling "What the hell are you two doing?" Remus, with Sirius's steadying hand and gulps of laughter against him, is glad, for once, that he isn't as good at pretending to snore as James is.

Remus was here.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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