

The Party by Jay Mounthey

“They want what?” Mal sounded strained but that wasn’t really surprising. Being father to a quartet of shifter cubs would strain anyone. Frequently.

“They said they wanted a Halloween party,” said Peasblossom. She seemed slightly unsure but then as mother to the afore-mentioned quadruplets that wasn’t surprising either.

“They aren’t happy about the Samhain observances in the woods?”

“They said those were fine but they’d heard about Halloween parties too and they want one of their own.”

Mal sighed. Then he consulted the others. Harlequin and Yarrow had no idea how to celebrate Halloween. Columbine and Elder didn’t care and said they didn’t think Moth would care either. Ferdy thought people might dress up and bob for apples but didn’t know what that meant. Starling said he thought human children scared each other with ghost stories which he didn’t think were a brilliant idea. The twins and Cocklebur thought that if it was a party there would be food and that was all that interested them. Somebody, possibly Harlequin, suggested a theme based on the monster that had kidnapped Cobweb when he was a teenager. Everybody listening turned various shades of pale and Yarrow vetoed the idea sharply.

“We don’t need to refer to that again,” was all he said and Mal agreed. He’d been instrumental in dealing with the monster and didn’t think it was a suitable idea for a children’s party even if people were just pretending. Besides, no child was going to want to be kidnapped from their own special event.

Then Mal had a sudden flash of inspiration and went looking for Oliver. Thorn’s human partner would surely know all about Halloween.

Oliver told Mal everything he knew about Halloween traditions: the British ones of ghost stories, bobbing for apples (which was apparently a real thing), turnip lanterns and so on, and the imported American ones of pumpkins and dressing up to go and trick or treat.

“Somewhere along the line I think people managed to confuse Halloween with Mischief Night which used to be the night before Bonfire Night here,” he finished and before he could get involved in even more impenetrable human traditions Mal brought him firmly back to Halloween.

“So basically you think we should do some kind of scary party,” he said.

“Yes,” said Oliver, “with food made to look like things it isn’t. Rolled small pancakes with nutshells on the end to look like fingers, iced biscuits like skulls, drinks with black colouring, and I’m sure you can think of more.”

“And then the really scary things,” Mal prompted.

“Well, what scares the cubs?”

“Peasblossom in a temper?” Mal hazarded.

Again, he asked around. Ferdy seemed most likely to know what might scare a wolf shifter. Not that Ferdy was a shifter, but being a fox fairy he might have more ideas than some.

“Huntsmen,” said Ferdy, But he didn’t mean the Wild Hunt and Mal couldn’t think how to produce any kind of hunting party though he did wonder about someone blowing a horn in the distance. “Fleas, too,” added the fox, and Mal shuddered. That was something else he wasn’t about to produce on demand.

They settled, eventually, for artfully crafted spider web decorations, a few turnip lanterns and various indeterminate noises the twins produced from somewhere in the trees. Moth researched ghost stories and agreed to read them in a suitably spooky voice while the others ate the food Peasblossom produced.

To Mal's surprise, everybody came. Not just the younger generation but all the adults, too. The finger pancakes were probably the biggest hit but everything went down well or at least quickly, and when Moth started reading you could have heard a pine needle drop.

The human ghost stories had the added strangeness of being about humans and human ghosts. Eventually she ran out of stories but promised the admiring crowd she'd find more for next year. The apple bobbing was a success; most people got quite damp but there were uncontrollable giggles. The night went quickly and eventually people drifted away, especially when the food ran out.

Afterwards, Mal asked the cubs whether they'd enjoyed it.

"Yes," said Mab. "The food was scrumptious."

"Yes," said May. "The stories were interesting."

"Yes," said Furze. "I want to learn to carve turnips."

"Yes," said Gorse, and stopped.

"I sense a 'but' somewhere there," said his father.

"Well..." Gorse glanced at the others and took a deep breath. "We didn't want to be scared and anyway, those things weren't scary. What we wanted..."

"Yes?" Mal waited.

"What we actually wanted," said Mab, interrupting her brother who was clearly not going to explain any time soon, "was for us to scare other people."

"We thought," said May, "that might be what Halloween would be all about."

"You manage that every night," Peasblossom said, quite firmly, "and now it's time for bed. The sun's already coming up." And in the whisk of a wolf's tail four furry cubs were cuddled up together in a nest of autumn leaves. Furze, Mal noticed, was clutching one of the turnip lanterns but fortunately the candle had burnt out.