

Part Sixteen
Halloween, 1976



It is a dark and stormy teatime. Remus Lupin, halfway through a heavily buttered crumpet, drops his teacup as the sound of thunder shakes Hogwarts' foundations. The cup thunks against the carpet and oozes tea outward in a little brown splotch. "Bugger," Remus mutters. He bends down to mop up the stain, napkin in one hand, the other still clutching his crumpet possessively. To leave a heavily buttered crumpet unattended in the Gryffindor common room is to bid farewell to it forever. "Bugger," Remus says again, only it sounds more like *buh-fnrr* with

crumpet in his mouth.

The door bangs open. "Hallo, what's this? Crumpets?" Sirius asks. Outside lightning flashes in the gloomy sky. "And there's extra! How kind of you to invite me to tea, Madame Lupin. I would be delighted to join you. I have even washed my fingers. Have you *seen* the rain?" Remus straightens to find Sirius sitting across from him, soaking wet and smelling faintly of dog. Remus tries not to look *too* disapproving. "Well I didn't go *out* when it was raining," Sirius mutters. "It sort of blew up all of a sudden. Pass the butter, will you?"

Remus sets his teacup down on the table and chances a quick glance at the sprawled tea-leaves. Better safe than sorry, he always says. "Hm," he murmurs. "That's funny."

"What is?" Sirius blinks. "The butter? Butter is never funny, Moony. Butter is extremely serious. The absence thereof in particular."

"The tea leaves, actually," Remus explains.

"What?" inquires Sirius, who, in the absence of the butter knife, has just started smearing his crumpet across the dish like a washcloth. "Is it a Grim? Maybe it's me. I am in your future, Moony. Whenever you pick up a crumpet or try to have a quiet Halloween tea, *there I will be lurking.*"

"No," Remus says carefully. "It's not a Grim. Have a look?" He passes it over. Sirius peers in, cheerfully stuffing his mouth with half a crumpet.

You're going to DIE, say the tea leaves.

"Huh," says Sirius, intrigued, and takes another contemplative bite. "That's new and horrible."

He shakes the cup. The leaves skitter and fall again: *Blood. Blood and doom.*

"It seems very clear on the doom thing," Sirius says solemnly, passing the teacup back to Remus, who examines it worriedly. "I can see why. It knows we're both crap at Divination. You've got to be very definite if you want to get your message through to us."

"Oh yes," Remus murmurs, tapping the cup inquiringly with his wand. "That's probably it."

"I wouldn't drink it if I were you," Sirius adds. "With the, you know, blood and all."

Three more tries and all the tea leaves have to offer is a *LOOK OUT BEHIND YOU*, a *The end is NIGH* and a very cheerful *Say your goodbyes NOW*. "It tells me I ought to say my goodbyes now," Remus says. "Goodbye, Sirius. It was lovely knowing you. I'm even fond of the times you put chocolate in my hair while I was sleeping. And when you made my nose sprout whiskers. And when you stole all my underwear and hid it in the lake."

"I made a lot of tadpoles happy," Sirius says. "They loved your pants. They swam in and out of the leg-holes all day thinking what a kind soul Remus J. Lupin must have been to donate his monogrammed underwear to their habitat. Does it really say to make your goodbyes?"

"This has never happened before," Remus says. "Yes. It does."

Sirius pours himself a cup of tea, heavy on the leaves. He swirls his cup around, knocks back the liquid, makes a sobbing sound as he loses the inside of his throat, and turns the cup right-side up. Both he and Remus lean close. Remus smells like butter. "Yum," Sirius says.

The tea leaves say, *BEWARE THE CORRIDORS*.

"Well," Sirius mutters. "I knew *that*."

"Why is your tea so much less murderous than my tea?" Remus asks. He knows injustice when he sees it. Or drinks it. "*Beware the corridors* -- that could mean anything. It could be perfectly harmless. Not like *You're going to die*. That one isn't really open to interpretation, is it."

"Piffle," Sirius says warmly. "That could mean 'You're going to die...of joy when you see what a great surprise the fates have in store for you!' It could be something wonderful. You simply refuse to see the positive in any situation. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about."

Thunder smacks into the castle like a fist. The windows burst open, flooding the room with the howl of wind and the squall of freezing rain. Remus, startled, entangles his foot in his chair and goes down hard on his nose; Sirius, cursing fluently in several languages, crosses the room in two strides and forces the iron windows shut.

"Ow," Remus says, struggling upright. That's going to swell in the morning.

"That's bizarre," Sirius says, frowning at the latch. "Did there used to be all these little ironwork demons around the window? I feel as if they were, you know, botanical patterns before. Flowers. Clover."

"That sofa is going to get moldy," Remus groans, with a heavy sigh. "I say, have you seen the rest of the House? Where *are* they?"



"Brilliant idea, Narcissa," Carmina Rosier says contentedly, blowing on her new, sparkling green nails. "All-girls' Slytherin sleepover in the haunted dungeons. How did you ever think of it? *Why* did you ever think of it?" She giggles nervously. "It's terribly naughty, isn't it? On Halloween? Ciss, I *do* love that nightie."

"It's from Paris," Narcissa drawls. She shakes back her mane of white-blond hair and crosses her elegantly manicured feet at the ankles. "Lucius bought it for me. Who's got the vodka?"

"We should play a game," Ermine Parkinson suggests from across the room. "Truth or dare?"

"Spin the bottle?" Bellatrix Black offers lazily, examining her teeth in a mirror, and then, at Ermine's sideways look, "Do you have a *problem*, Parkinson?"

"We're not playing Spin the Bottle," Narcissa says sharply, elbowing her younger sister in the ribs. Bellatrix glares at her and takes an enormous pull directly from the vodka bottle.

"Well," Bellatrix murmurs, "but we *could*."

Carmina giggles again, tugging at a shining brown curl. "We could talk about our *deepest, darkest secrets*. We could tell each other our *greatest fantasies*," she suggests. "You know. I don't know why I just said that!"

"My nightie is feeling so tight," Bellatrix informs everyone. "I think I may have to take it off."

"Something is wrong with this situation," Narcissa murmurs. She can't exactly put her finger on it, but it's there. Perhaps it's the way Bellatrix is licking the rim of the vodka bottle. Has she ever done that before? Or perhaps it's the way Carmina is sitting, bosom charging ahead of her like the prow of a ship. Has her bosom ever been that omnipresent? Or perhaps it's the nighties, flimsy green chiffon all around with the faintest hint of lace. Have they ever actually worn nighties? Have they ever actually gotten along with one another for long enough to have a sleepover? And what in Merlin's name is that dripping sound?

"But Ciss," Carmina murmurs. "Everything feels so *right*."

"I know what we should do," Ermine says.

A moment later a large green pillow overstuffed with white, downy feathers hits Narcissa in the side of the head.

The dungeons erupt in an explosion of feathers, giggles, shrieks and the tearing of lace and chiffon, limbs flying, painted nails clutching at velvety linens. Narcissa promptly forgets what it was she was thinking -- it couldn't have been very important, could it? -- as she attempts to bludgeon Ermine's impeccably made-up face in with a satin pillowcase.

They are laughing as no sensible Slytherin girl has ever done when a clap of thunder is followed by a snapping sound, and all the torches go out.

"Ciss?" Carmina whispers.

"I can't see anything," Narcissa replies.

Ermine screams.

And then, silence.

"Lumos," Narcissa says, finding her wand by the side of the bed and trying to think clearly. A little yellow light circles outward from the tip of her wand. Carmina leaps to her, clutching her free arm, her lower lip trembling.

Bellatrix and Ermine are gone.



"And as you can see," James says, "the art of carving the pumpkin is not so 'sodding stupid' as you think." This is not, he decides as he sets his pumpkin seed scoop down and picks a pumpkin seed out of his left nostril, what being Head Boy is supposed to be like.

First of all, there was not so much orange goop involved in his limited authoritarian fantasies. Secondly, he was not, in these fantasies, accompanied by three tittering fifth-year prefects who think they know best. Thirdly, Lily was usually gazing at him adoringly, not carefully stringing pulp out of her hair and being generally unhelpful.

"It won't help," he informs her. "It sticks in there and your hair goes all stiff."

"I suppose you would know," she snaps. She looks, for the first time in James' entire experience of Lily Evans, rather red and unattractive. Also, there is pumpkin glop on her eyelashes. It is all extraordinarily disorienting.

"As a matter of fact," he begins, raising a finger, and they might have really gotten into a proper row, except that at this point some Ravenclaw prefect -- whose name James has not yet bothered to learn -- coughs politely and says, "I'm sorry, er, I don't mean to be rude, but we carve them to, er, introduce the first-years to the joys of the Halloween tradition and Hogwarts holidays in general, right?"

"Yes," James grunts, plunging his knife into the pumpkin's painted-on eye with rather too much enthusiasm. "Got it in one. Good man. Keep that up, you could be Head Boy someday."

"Er," the Ravenclaw says. "And it...provides them with shining memories and provides them with a sense of blithesome childlike wonder, does it?"

"It did me," James says wearily, looking up at him. "Look, it's a very important part of the Feast, and I know it seems stupid but it's jolly good fun really, and the kids like it. It's great effect."

"...Right," the Ravenclaw agrees, very slowly. James notices, for the first time, that the gazes of the assembled Prefects have turned from stifled amusement to glassy horror. Thunder rumbles ominously. "So, then...what's the blood for?"

James turns. From the handle of his suddenly extremely shiny carving knife, apparently flowing from the bruise-orange skin of the pumpkin itself, has dripped a huge puddle of something red and thick. It is on James' trousers. It smells disconcertingly of meat. As James stares at it, not comprehending, another roll of thunder rattles the windowpanes and the lights go out.

The sketched-on face of the jack-o'-lantern, frozen blue in the flash of lightning, looks suddenly absolutely terrifying. There is a sound like a gasp -- and he can feel Lily, in the midst of delicately shaking a string of pulp out of one ear, freeze behind him in the thick, silent darkness.

"Oh," James says, carefully, into the sudden silence. "That. Kids! You know. Bloody-minded. They love this. Er--"

The candles slowly flicker back to life. James looks around. The blood has pooled around his shoes now, and tipped the edge of Lily's skirt, and what's worse--

The three prefects are gone. He and Lily are alone in the room full of disemboweled pumpkins, which suddenly seems very large and very dark in the corners.

"What's happened?" Lily whispers.

"This is not right," James says, with great conviction. "Not right at all."

"What is inside that pumpkin?" Lily asks, edging closer to James in the gloom. Surprisingly, James is not excited that they are close; he is too busy wondering when his bladder will give out on him.

"A cow, apparently," James manages. "Er. All right. We shouldn't panic."

"I'm not panicking," Lily says. She grabs his hand. They stare at each other. "I am simply seeking comfort of a physical kind," Lily mutters. "It does not mean anything. We should not share this intimate moment as anything passionate, revelatory or even interesting. The pumpkin is gushing blood and I am holding your hand. All right?"

"All right," James agrees. He has no idea what she's trying to tell him. "But we shouldn't panic."

"Well," Lily says. "What *should* we do?"

"Whatever's happening," James says, "we are not unarmed!" He grasps the handle of the pumpkin seed scoop and waves it above his head triumphantly.

"James Potter," Lily says, "you are indeed qualified to de-seed evil."

Peter is just sitting down to a nice hot mug of cider when the lights go out. Luckily, his hands are already on the mug of cider. He takes a deep swallow, wipes a cider moustache off his upper lip, and sighs happily.

"So, er," Sirius says. "This is sort of terrifying, isn't it?" Of course, he doesn't sound terrified. He looks a little wet still, though they've been sitting in front of the fire now for a good fifteen minutes. "It's sort of like being in the middle of a bad dream, only it makes more sense, eh?"

"I think the lightning is a little bit much, personally," Remus murmurs. He pokes the fire wearily. "If you count the seconds between them they're coming at an abnormally fast pace. It just isn't natural."

"Remus," Sirius says. "Moony. You are going to die and I have to beware the corridor and you are discussing how quickly the lightning should or should not be coming?"

"And the thunder," Remus adds. "Have you ever heard thunder like that?"

"We have offended the heavens," Sirius reasons. "Aren't you even the least bit excited?"

Remus eyes one of the windows. The rain slams against the glass, the clouds drawn so tight across the sky that no light shines through. Only the ghostly, ghostly flicker of flames in the fireplace lets Remus see his own fingers before him, and Sirius' face, sharply angular in the odd light. It is eerie, he has to admit, but it doesn't feel real. Not entirely. The tea leaves were the first clue, though Remus isn't even sure this is a mystery yet. "Well," he says, thinking out loud, "everyone else *is* missing. Unless we're the ones who've disappeared. Isn't that possible?"

"Can't be," Sirius says, looking manfully brave.

"Why not?"

"Well," Sirius explains, "well, because we're *us*!" And therefore, presumably, the heroes. In the enormous morality play that appears to be Sirius Black's life, it only makes sense for him to be the hero. Remus, however, knows better, and is more than well aware that he is the sidekick with the books who hangs about in the back being a good influence with a posh accent and then is killed tragically just before the climax. "Besides, we haven't disappeared, we're in the common room," Sirius points out. "I bet they're all at some big secret party. Wankers. Shall we go hunt them down?"

Remus eyes him balefully. Hunting down the missing persons is the best possible way to get them both devoured. Not to mention they'll have to go through the corridors. If Dr. Frankenstein, for example, had just stayed in his common room and eaten crumpets, he would probably have kept a good deal of people out of a good deal of mess. "I'm sure they'll come back."

"Moony!" Sirius scoffs. "I'd never have thought *you'd* be all superstitious. Like an old lady."

"I'm not," Remus protests. "It's just -- this all feels a bit *weird*, doesn't it? I don't mean supernatural weird, I mean like a film. Like it's all just for effect. Don't you feel that?" As if on cue, a draft from the door stirs the filmy curtains around the window, which billow dramatically into Remus's head. Remus fights them for a while, wondering if he will be suffocated by curtains, if that will be his dramatic, tea-leaf-predicted death. At last, Sirius untangles him, taking his head in both hands and making a spooky face. "You look demented," Remus mutters. "You smell like butter and wet dog."

"So do you," Sirius says. "Well, the butter part. Come on! Nothing will get done if we just sit around the fire, fighting killer attack curtains. We have to be *off*. We have to be *brave*. We have to face our fates and triumph!"

"We have to fling ourselves head-first into doom," Remus corrects him. "That's what you want, is it? You read the tea leaves. You know what they've said. It just seems silly to court disaster like that."

"True," Sirius agrees, "I *did* read them. But they didn't tell *me* I'm going to die, now did they?" Sirius grins. "Come on, you didn't believe that, did you? Since when have tea leaves actually spelled it out for us? It's always 'this splodgy shape could either mean life-long happiness or dying of nasty boils or exploding without warning under the scythe moon.' It's never 'Hallo chaps, how's it going, enjoy your imminent death.'"

"Well," Remus admits, "I suppose."

"And like I said," Sirius repeats. "All *I* have to be afraid of is the corridor!"

"I hope there is a gigantic monster with smelly feet in the corridor," Remus mutters, "waiting for you. I hope you spend eternity between its toes."

"I can always leave you here and be right back," Sirius offers.

The thunder cackles ominously.

"No," Remus assures him. "No, that's all right. I'll come with."



"It's really amazing," Frank Longbottom says, "the way your head reflects the light like that." He holds his wand, glowing faintly, up against Kingsley Shacklebolt's shaved head and watches the light radiate outwards.

"That is annoying me," Kingsley says simply.

"Right," Frank says, and moves it away. "I was only making an observation. About your head. You know, I don't think you're feeling very friendly today."

"I don't like people shining things on my head," Kingsley says.

"I don't see why not," Frank says sadly. "What a waste. It's practically a mirror. I could see myself in it. Hi there, Frankie!"

"Go away, Longbottom," Kingsley says.

"Where?" Frank asks, reasonably. Only a moment ago, the two of them were in the Quidditch shed surrounded by all the other Captains and Deputy-Captains for a pre-season meeting; now, the shed is empty and very, very dark and the only things that remain of their meeting are many notes, all over the floor. Idly, Frank picks one up; *Make sure to cheat*, it says. *Cheat cheat cheat cheat*.

"I don't care where," Kingsley rumbles. "Go to that corner."

"Look at this," Frank says. "Must be Slytherin's."

Kingsley inclines his head regally, reads it, and then slowly gets to his feet. It is an impressive process, something like watching an avalanche in reverse. "I am going outside," he says.

"I wouldn't," Frank warns. "It's raining something terrible. And remember that six people just vanished before our very eyes. Doesn't that, you know, make you nervous?"

"No," Kingsley says.

Frank has to admit: he has a point. If he were Kingsley, he wouldn't be nervous either. There is something about Kingsley that suggests he will probably never be nervous. He makes other people nervous instead. All around him, they use up any available supply of nervous to be had, as he moves amongst them, perfectly un-nervous. "So," Frank swallows. "So you're leaving, then? What if you get struck by lightning? Knocked over by thunder? What if you disappear? What if *I* disappear? Where will I go? What will I do?"

"Frank, my dear," Kingsley says, "I don't give a damn."

He steps out into the rain, which *is* coming down hard, and immediately finds that he is wet. Holding one hand up to shield his eyes, he surveys the Quidditch pitch. Unbelievable lightning slashes the sky in the distance. The wind howls like a dying dog. He holds firm to the ground, feet planted wide apart, and looks down from his great height upon the world, which seems to have come to the edge of the apocalypse.

"Well," Kingsley decides out loud, "the whole world is going mad." But not him.

He turns to go back into the Quidditch shed and finds the door swinging loose on a hinge and Frank Longbottom gone.

"Well," Kingsley says to Severus Snape, who seems to have taken Frank's place. "You're not Frank."

"A fact for which I thank the Fates three times every day," the Slytherin snarls, climbing to his feet. Kingsley stares down his nose at him. He, too, has frequently thanked whatever Supreme Power may exist that he is not Frank Longbottom; which doesn't mean he appreciates some snot-nosed little Slytherin whiner doing it.

"I don't appreciate some snot-nosed little Slytherin whiner insulting my good friend Frank," he says, impassively.

Snape seems to realize, for the first time, whom he is so rudely addressing. His gaze travels slowly up from Kingsley's feet to his eyes. It takes a while.

"Comprende?" Kingsley cocks his head to one side. He is nothing if not reasonable.

Snape nods wordlessly.

"Good," Kingsley says. "Come on. We're going outside."

"But--" Snape starts, and then says, in a very small voice, "outside, did you say?"

"It's only *raining*." People are such idiots. Kingsley is aware, in a distant way, that he is less a schoolboy than he is a force of nature, and therefore has, personally, nothing to fear from storm nor sleet nor rising flood. What he has more trouble understanding is that other people don't have his particular outlook on life. He peers out into the storm. Some dead trees, which he is fairly sure were not there this afternoon, creak threateningly in the high wind.

"Oh," Snape says. "I don't -- I don't see why I should go with you."

"Because," Kingsley says, slowly, reasonably, as if talking to a child, "*I told you to.*"

A flash of lightning curves outside the window. It probably bounces in a stunning arc off Kingsley's bald head. Frank would be amused.

"Oh," Snape mumbles again. "Very well, then. Under duress. Whatever you say."

"Good," Kingsley says.

The light glancing off his head leads the way back to the school.

"Sirius," Remus says. None of the torches in their sconces along the walls are lit. No one is laughing, crying, screaming in pain or delight or rage. The only sounds are those made by the storm, the wind throwing itself up against the walls, or the rain slamming into the windows, or the very foundations of the castle creaking with the ferocity of what cannot possibly be a natural phenomenon. "Sirius."

"Not scared, are you?" Sirius whispers. There is a certain reverence in his tone for the situation. They are defying the tea leaves. It is only now beginning to sink in. Darkness spreads before them and behind them, up and down the dread corridor. "Owoooooooooooo."

"I am not," Remus scoffs. "You should be."

"Pff," Sirius snorts. "I fear nothing."

Remus, who can barely see Sirius' wand glowing up ahead, does something silly. Maybe it's the rain, or the lightning, or the faint smell of rotting pumpkins permeating the chilly, humid air. Maybe it's the threat of impending death. Maybe it's Sirius' cocky attitude. Later, he won't remember what blithe spirit possessed him, only that now, he quickens his silent pace, puts out his wand, and places both hands on Sirius' back.

"AUGH!" Sirius screams.

He goes down kicking.

Remus follows soon after, as Sirius' toes connect with his shin.

"Augh," Remus agrees.

"AGH -- oh." Sirius, his fingers having encountered Remus's very distinctive nose, sits up, rumped and recovered. "You are a bastard, Remus Lupin," he hisses, "a bastard and a stinker. I hope whatever lurks in this corridor eats your head."

"It won't," Remus says cheerfully, "the Corridor Monster tolls for thee and thee alone."

"You watch," Sirius grumbles. From the darkness come the sounds of a rumped aristocrat picking himself up, shoes scuffing on the stone and the pat-pat-pat of someone energetically dusting off his sleeves. "I'll have my revenge when you least expect it. Oi, you've knocked my wand somewhere, you unbearable wanker. Light yours."

"I am," Remus mutters irritably, sitting up, and then realizes that his hand is empty. He stares at it, idiotically, for about a minute before accepting that he simply can't see it in the oppressive blackness. "Oh -- *bugger*."

"Not again," Sirius moans. "All because you couldn't resist your childish impulses! Evil werewolf. Ruthless, vicious child of darkness."

"Shh," Remus hisses.

"There isn't even anyone around!" Sirius snaps, but he sounds sheepish.

Remus presses his face into his hands. *Think, Lupin, think*. "They can't have gotten far," he says, voice calmer. "We'll just look around and we're bound to come up with something."

"You look around," Sirius says. "My death is waiting for me here."

"I thought you 'fear nothing'," Remus recalls. "All right. I'll look." He's glad there aren't any lights on. No one looks attractive crawling around on his hands and knees with his rump up in the air and dust somewhere up his nose. Not that this is the sort of situation in which attractiveness is required; it is the situation in which blind luck and desperation must prevail. He gropes about in the darkness, wondering if, at any moment, a skeletal hand will grab his wrist. Death is waiting.

"Keep talking, Moony," Sirius' voice says, to his left, high up. "Say something. Anything. Recite poetry. I won't even mock you."

"I can't think of anything," Remus whispers.

"Oh my God," Sirius says. "We're going to die, aren't we? This is your way of telling me. *You don't remember anything*. Moony, listen, there's something I've got to tell you before we kick it."

"Disgusting," Remus mutters. "There's something *wet* -- are you still dripping?"

"Remus, listen to me, this is very important--"

"Got it!" Remus grasps his wand triumphantly, holding it high above his head. "*Lumos!*" Weak light flutters from his fist which is, disturbingly, red and sticky. "Hallo, is that *blood* or cranberry juice?" He turns to face Sirius, wand wavering between them. "Well? What is it?"

Sirius falters, squinting. "I got chocolate on your sweater," he says, averting his eyes. "Your favorite one. That light in front of your face makes your nose look *enormous*. Like a great big dolphin sticking out of your head."

"My favorite sweater?" Remus repeats, stunned. "Not the green one? With the hole for your thumbs in the sleeve?"

"Oh," Sirius says weakly. "Did I say that? You know, I'm not sure we're really going to die, so I don't think that counts--"

"Counts?" Remus snaps. "As a confession? My favorite sweater!"

"All right, I'm a bastard," Sirius agrees. "Is it cranberry juice? Where would we have gotten cranberry juice fr...oh...God..."

Remus feels his stomach fill with something cold and heavy. Sirius is staring just over his shoulder, gray eyes wide in horror, the wavering light dancing insanely over his face. *Beware the corridors!* shrieks a voice in Remus's head. *Say your goodbyes NOW!*

Slowly, agonizingly slowly, Remus turns around.

Something immense launches itself into him and sinks its teeth into his throat. Remus opens his mouth like he's going to scream but the thing is on his *throat*, on his back, huge and heavy and *you're going to DIE* and--

"I want to suck your bloooood," Sirius hisses in sepulchral tones, very close to his ear.

"You are going to *die*," Remus says.

"Who says?" Sirius says. "No, *besides* the teacups. It's strawberry filling, by the way. I have a pie under my shirt. Or I did, before you decided to tackle me."

"I just threw up inside," Remus says, his voice shaking. "I'm about to throw up outside. Why did you have a pie under your shirt? I don't care. Oogh. Get off me."

Sirius pulls himself off, eyes dancing wickedly. Remus tries to keep his hands steady as he nurses an aching bottom. He supposes he deserved it -- payback, after all -- but it feels as if his heart is about to explode out his nose. There'd be room enough for it, not to mention.

"Come on," Sirius is soothing, patting him on the back. "At least you didn't wet yourself or cry like a girl or scream like James or something else embarrassing like that."

"You ruined my sweater and I think you've killed me," Remus says. He doesn't mean it. He doesn't ever exactly mean it, thrilled, secretly, by the sudden acceleration of his heart-rate and the heat of his blood at his temples. What matters is making a big show of protesting the cruel treatment. He is a prefect, after all. He has a reputation to uphold, future generations of large-nosed, anal-retentive werewolves to blaze the way for. Such injuries as a bruised bottom and an exploded heart are par for the course. His breath is already steadying, the light in his own eyes, an answering call to some far-off, hungry demon, dimming. "Such cruelty should be punished."

"Oogly oogly," Sirius says, waggling his fingers. "Spooky, innit."

"You are more terrifying when you aren't trying to be," Remus murmurs dryly. "*Much* more."

"Come on," Sirius says. "We're almost at the kitchens. You can take my arm, if you'd like. I can sling you over my shoulder and keep you safe from harm."

"Squish," Remus mutters, bringing one hand down like, he hopes, a big smelly monster foot.

"Well, I need a damsel," Sirius explains. "A damsel in distress. No doubt there are booby traps being set up by invisible hands of malevolence *as we speak*. We are wasting time! Heads could roll! I want a slice of pie or something, all this excitement is making me nippish."

"You don't need any more pie," Remus mutters. "You've got pie all down your shirtfront. It looks like you've been stabbed. Why do you always have to keep food in your clothes? You know, some people keep it in a cupboard, or a knapsack, or at least not in their armpit, for heaven's sake."

"Easy access," Sirius says cheerfully. "Whoops! It's a left here, Moony, don't go wandering off alone. Oogly boogly!" He makes a ridiculous cross-eyed face.

"Squish," Remus says. He draws his brows together in what he hopes is an evil and intimidating fashion. "Squish, squish."

Peter is tired of cider now. Which is why it's lucky that his attendant house-elves have started bringing him cocoa and exciting pumpkin drinks instead. Thrilled at the prospect of such an enthusiastic-- and apparently bottomless -- non-Sirius human being on which to test their latest recipes, they have done nothing but force interesting foods on him for the last hour. Force may be the wrong word. Peter takes a bite of something blue and nods appreciatively.

"I'm just going to go to the lavatory," he informs the head kitchen elf, who nods and bows so low that her little head scrapes the ground, ushering him in the right direction.

It is the best day *ever*.

"So," James says. Lily glares at him. "Well, this isn't *my* fault," he mutters. "I don't see how this can possibly be *my* fault."

"It isn't," Lily snaps. "I'm not angry at you. I am scared."

James stares at her. She doesn't look scared. She looks pink in the cheek and ready to punch some offensive pranksters. He's surprised he's still alive, quite frankly, and not because of the puddles of blood all over the floor or the fact that, in the past five minutes, the pumpkins have actually started to move. "Uhm," James says. He tries to look away, but manages only to move his lips in an unattractive fashion. "You don't actually look scared, you know."

"I am terrified," Lily hisses. "Trust me."

"And you sound angry," James adds. "Are you sure you're not angry? You could be angry. That's better than being scared. Terrified." He pauses.

"I'm not scared." He licks his lips. "Well, a bit, I think. Do you like sensitive men or the strong and noble type?"



"James," Lily says. "I think you are panicking. What I am doing is trying not to panic. Looking angry helps me."

"And it's easy, right?" James says. "Ha ha, because I'm here. Ha ha. Ha?"

"The pumpkin moved again," Lily informs him. She sounds weary. "The one to your left. Listen, I have pumpkin seeds in my hair and on my nose and in my ears, too, I think, and the way you're behaving is hardly manful or reassuring, and dating Kingsley Shacklebolt was like dating a giant oak -- which is, actually, manful and reassuring, but hardly something a girl can warm up to -- and right now, when I *need* someone manful and reassuring, I have you, which is the irony, isn't it, because a girl *can* warm up to you, but your voice has raised at least an octave in the past hour. So do you see, do you *see*, what I am going through?"

James has no idea. "Of course," James says. "I *can* be manful. I *can* be reassuring. I saved Snape's life!"

"No one is more shocked than I," Lily replies.

"Actually, Snape," James points out, "he was pretty shocked."

"Probably," Lily says with dark amusement. "Did you just feel something? I think the vines are moving now."

In the corner of James's vision, one long, green, tentacle of a vine slithers into a curious, upright position. The rain slams against the windows.

"So you were *dating*, you and Kingsley," James says, suddenly. "We would call that *dating*. But in the past tense?"

"Yes," Lily snaps. "It was, past tense, like *dating* Mount Kilimanjaro. I told you."

"Oh," James says, trying not to feel intensely pleased and failing.

"Are you ever going to tell me what you did?" Lily asks, in a voice that strives for unconcerned normalcy and lands somewhere around Poorly Repressed Terror.

"There is nothing I would rather do, but no," James says. "I could make up a story if you like."

"That's better than nothing," Lily admits faintly. One of her knees is pressing against James's knee, completely by accident; he can feel her heartbeat through his kneecap, which is bizarre and, even more bizarrely, comforting.

"Make something up. We can always set the pumpkins on fire if they make a move."

"All right," James says, swallowing. The vines have curled together now, rustling, as if conferring. "Er. How would you like it to start?"

"It was a dark and stormy night," Lily prompts.

"All right," James says. Lightning flashes and Lily twitches a little against him, her sweet-smelling hair just inches from his nose. "Dark and stormy night. I was oiling my abdominal muscles in the Common Room,

attracting the attention of many a passing female--"

"You haven't got any abdominal muscles," Lily reminds him, and pokes him in the stomach to prove her point. "See? Soft, like a pillow."

"I have," James insists. He squeezes. *Come on, team Potter.* "See? Can't you feel him? That, right there. That's Stanley." Lily just gives him a look. "In any case, this is my story, and *in it*, my abdominal muscles were being oiled. By myself. Not to say there wasn't a clamor of those who wished to assist me in it."

"Of course," Lily murmurs.

"Of course," James agrees. "In any case, with my abdominal muscles freshly oiled and myself looking bronzed and dashing--"

"Pale and pasty," Lily supplies.

"--it came to my attention that Severus Snape was in the throes of -- drowning. Yes. That's it. Drowning. He was drowning. In any case, all you have to know is that it wasn't my fault, or Remus', or Peter's, and sort of Sirius', even though he didn't mean it. And Snape is a great big wanker anyway so he deserved being told off. Not dying. So I says to myself, says I, it is time to be the hero you have always known you are!"

"You struck a pose," Lily offers. "You flashed your teeth. You let the light sparkle in the corner of your eye."

"Seven buxom lasses swooned," James says. "As I sped out the door in nothing but my oiling garb -- there was no time to change into a hero's outfit -- I thought to myself, I cannot wait until Lily Evans knows of my heroics."

"Oh my," Lily says. "How romantic."

"Well, I saved his life," James says. "There were snakes and leeches and it was dark and stormy, so, you know, lightning." Lightning strikes a tree close by, or must, by the sound cracking sound just outside the window to their right, and a flash of light too bright to be anything but wood splintering with the force of its heat. "Uncanny, that," James murmurs. "Are you holding my hand?"

"I think so," Lily says.

Their eyes meet for an awkward moment. James doesn't know whether to stare soulfully into her emerald depths or look away and not seem overly eager. If this is what the rest of his life is going to be like then perhaps he'd just better give up now on ever learning how not to be infatuated or, at least, how not to show it. Why are girls so complicated, he mourns. Why does he want to be near this girl when all that happens while he's near her only compounds his apparent lunacy? Being crazy about someone isn't nice or passionate or deeply moving; it is, surprisingly enough, *crazy*. In any case, he can't see why it is he does this to himself.

Lily gives his hand a squeeze.

Oh, James thinks giddily. *That's why.*

"There's no one in the library," Remus whispers. The long, high bookshelves look menacing in the shadows, book bindings like an army lined up before them, waiting. He shrinks back, confused and disoriented. When all the world goes mad, the library is his haven. Now, it simply smells of old books and reeks of darkness, with a *plip plip* somewhere in its depths and who-knows-what lurking who-knows-where.

"Moony," Sirius says, "there is *never* anyone in the library. This is why *I* wanted to go to the *kitchens*."

"There are, sometimes," Remus protests. "How would you know, anyway?"

Sirius winks and taps the side of his nose. "Those are my natural powers of deduction at work. Anywhere you spend most of your life is bound to be mostly devoid of human interaction. Stands to reason. Also, honestly, Moony: *library*."

"Someday I will make you understand," Remus mutters. "Anyway, you have to admit it's strangely devoid of last-minute studiers. And there are no couples in the stacks, or anything. And where's--"

He is about to say Madam Pince when someone all of a sudden someone looms up in front of him, bent and weathered as an old tree, eyes burning out of the darkness. Remus falls backward.

"Anghh!" Sirius yelps, and clutches his shoulders.

"Hello there, boys," the apparition whispers, in a voice brittle like dry leaves, rubbing against each other. "Not...afraid to be out after dark, are you?"

Remus takes a step backwards. "But it isn't after dark," he babbles, inanely. "It was only tea-time half an hour ago and just because the storm came along doesn't mean, technically, it's *after* dark just because it's dark outside. There *is* a distinction. Do you see that? Quite clearly, one signifies that it's past the hour for the sane and reasonable to be awake, while the other simply means it is dark outside because of a natural phenomenon like rain, or a tornado."

The apparition seems momentarily stunned.

Sirius takes the chance for all its worth. "YERAUGH!" he cries, apparently, Remus decides, going completely insane at last. Not a moment later, however, Sirius leaps forward, knocking Remus out of harm's way, and kicks the apparition in the shins. Its white face, with long, drooping black holes for its eyes and mouth, doesn't seem so much pained as it does confused.

"Not afraid to be out after dark, are you?" it repeats.

"Your face looks like melted wax!" Sirius yells. "And you are wearing a bedsheet!"

"Not afraid to be out after dark, are you?"

"Again," Remus says, "I really must insist that we find some other terminology for this time of day. We haven't even had supper yet. It can hardly be construed as late."

"Not afraid to be oogk achhk oooghk," the apparition splutters one final, failing time, and then disappears.

"Well," Sirius says, wiping his hands triumphantly. "We are an excellent team. Moony and Padfoot! Fighting apparitions one ghost at a time. You confuse them with long sentences, and while they are befuddled I slap them like a girl. What do you say? I think we've a career in it."

"I just tried to reason with something that wanted to kill us," Remus realizes. "Didn't I."

"I'm not sure it wanted to kill us," Sirius says doubtfully. "Unless it was going to -- to repeat us to death. You know what? I don't like this Halloween as much as I have liked Halloweens in the past."

"It feels like one of those awful paperbacks," Remus agrees. "With the author's name written in shiny blood on the front cover. I think we should talk to Dumbledore."

"We don't need Dumbledore," Sirius cries dramatically, "for we are Moony and Padfoot, ghost fighters extraordinaire! What can Dumbledore do that we can't? Can he befuddle? Can he kick in the shins?"

"Oh," Remus says doubtfully. "I really do think maybe we should. I mean, this all smacks of an unauthorized prank to me."

Sirius's eyes widen. "Do you think? No one should be pranking this school but us! After all, who knows what they might be planning? This should not be allowed! It's -- why, it's anti-union, and it should be stopped!"

"If you say so," Remus says.

"Onward!" Sirius cries, and charges ahead.

Spiced pumpkin, Peter thinks, is one of the best inventions ever. Spiced pumpkin juice is better. He downs the entire mug without breathing, and exhales in pumpkiny, spicy satisfaction. "Oh, Winky," he says, "you are amazing." The house elf turns a strange and stripy shade of pink.

"Winky is never knowing anyone who likes her Pumpkins as much as the headmaster is liking them," she says. "Winky is making you more!"

Peter pats his stomach. "Oh, no thank you, Winky," he says. "I've got to find my friends, and get into costume."

Winky watches him lovingly as he leaves. "I will be saving toast for you!" her voice echoes after him.

What a day, Peter thinks. What a spectacular day. Even if the halls *are* oddly dark.



"Well," Kingsley says, "it seems everyone is gone." The great hall is empty, and suspiciously quiet. No ghosts float past him; no idiot first year slams into his legs and goes down from the impact; no Frank is prodding at his biceps to assure a fifth year female that they are, indeed, more solid than rock. It feels odd. Nice, and quiet, but very odd.

"Impressive powers of deduction," Snape mutters. "However could you tell?"

Kingsley turns his dark, serious eyes to Snape's shrewd, sallow face. He cracks the knuckles of one hand against the palm of the other. "It seems everyone is gone," he repeats, in a tone that intimates *so no one will hear you scream*.

"There is indeed no one here," Snape agrees. "There is no one, no one at all."

"Exactly," Kingsley says.

"You know," Snape says shrilly, "I was just thinking about how helpful I would like to be. What can I do to be helpful?"

"I don't think you're being sincere," Kingsley says.

"I can't imagine where you would get that impression," Snape says, eyes darting from side to side.

From down the hallway, something crashes. It sounds like a wardrobe falling over.

"Come on," Kingsley instructs.

"Oh," Snape says, "come now, Shacklebolt, are you sure? *Untrustworthy Slytherin!* Last person you want watching your back."

"I don't need you watching my back," Kingsley reminds him. Snape probably could not fit all of Kingsley's back into his field of view anyway. "I'm keeping an eye on your back. And the rest of you. Come on."

"Oh," Snape says again, miserably.

Kingsley strides forward as Snape trails behind, sending furtive, longing glances at the windows.

"Don't bother," Kingsley says. "Fifth floor."

"So," James says. "How long do you think it'll be?" The pumpkins aren't even trying to be subtle, now, bumping along the table tops and the floor with gaping wide mouths and very sharp teeth. James *gave* them those teeth. He supposes they should be *grateful*, not trying to kill him. "Before we're eaten and the rats get our remains, that is."

"That's not going to happen," Lily says. "I am not going to be killed by *pumpkins*. This is ridiculous. Where is everyone? What is happening? Why do I feel as if I'm trapped in a cheap novel?"

"I could rip off your bodice," James points out, "but I haven't, now have I."

"Yet," Lily mutters. "Who knows how desperate you'll get before we're through?"

"We could always jump out the window," James suggests. "I mean, I know it's a long way down and all, and we'll probably break every bone in our body, but the pumpkins have blocked off all possible exits and I'm really worried about those vine things. I swear they weren't here when we got in."

"The pumpkins weren't trying to kill us when we got in, either!" Lily adds, a tad hysterically. "I say we start -- I don't know, start setting them on fire! Killing them! Chopping them into little pieces!"

A collective snarl goes up from the pumpkin warriors. "I think," James whispers, "*I think* you made them angrier."

"This is ridiculous," Lily snaps. "We have wands. We have pumpkin carving knives. We are -- we are Seventh Years! To think, we are sitting here, cowering in a corner, when we could be -- no, *should* be -- taking action!" She stands up, cheeks flushed, hair wild, if not somewhat gloppy still, around her face. James feels weak in the knees. "Come on," she commands, grabbing firm hold of his hand and waving her wand in front of her.

"Right," James says. "Right! Solidarity! Strength! Damn the pumpkins! Full speed ahead!"

Something under his left foot goes squelch. It is one of the pumpkins a first year carved, with a lopsided face and uneven nostrils. A piece of its left eye stares reproachfully up at him.

"I killed it," James says, stunned. "I killed it with my foot."

"Kingsley," Lily says, "would have killed *twenty* with his *bare* feet without blinking an eye."

James looks at the pumpkin. He looks at his foot. Both are a pulpy, seedy, orange mess. He looks at the pumpkin again. Everything in the room feels suspended in time, on the verge of greatness, or total failure. Even the moving pumpkins are watching him with great hollow eyes, some even flickering with candlelight on the inside. "Well," James says finally, "I'm not stepping on any of the ones that can light me on fire."

"Stop talking," Lily says.

"Right," James agrees. "It's time to make some *pumpkin pie*."

"Ow," Sirius says. "Have there always been full suits of armor there? I swear, they were over by the wall, not in the middle of the *bloody* hallway!" Remus leans down to help him, picking a metal elbow off his head and digging through a pile of breastplate, broadsword, shield to find Sirius' hand and tug him up. "It hasn't always been there," Sirius insists. "It *hasn't*."

"Actually," Remus says, "I think it was moving. At us. You got in its way, of course. Heroic. Brilliant. We should get Dumbledore immediately. There is only so much blind luck can do to save us."

"Beware the corridors, my Aunt Agnes' arse," Sirius mutters. "Beware the bloody suits of armor coming at you with a broadsword. Could have spelled *that* one out for us, but *no*."

"Tea leaves," Remus recalls. "Never helpful, are they. I don't suppose there was enough space in the mug for all those words."

"They could have written it small," Sirius points out, "if they--you know, I think that's three more suits of armor, and I think they're coming this way, and if you could help me get my foot out of this helmet so I could run like a

child I would be ever so grateful--"

"It's clanking," Remus whispers. "Ominously. Honestly, this is absurd. How long can this storm go on? Is it dinner yet? You're going to have to give up on that pie -- if you'd just let go of it then you could use your hand to pull your foot out -- come on, you have to help me!"

"Axe!" Sirius hisses. "It has a *great big axe*! Moony -- yaugh!" With these painfully un-distinguished last words, he teeters and crashes magnificently down over the former suit of armor and goes head over heels -- or, rather, heels over helmet -- backwards down the hallway, dragging Remus with him.

"Narcissa, I'm frightened," Carmina whimpers, pressing herself against Narcissa's thigh. Their fingers are interlaced. Narcissa cannot help thinking that, in a situation like this, what she really needs is more vodka. "I am so frightened. What should we do?"

"I don't know," Narcissa says irritably. "How should I know?"

"You're a *prefect*," Carmina breathes while regarding her with trembling blue eyes. "You are so knowledgeable and -- and I've always admired you, did you know that?"

"This is ridiculous," Narcissa snaps, jerking her hand away from Carmina's waist, where it has somehow wandered. "I don't even like you. You don't even like me."

"Well, maybe that's why this has happened," Carmina points out, snuggling against Narcissa's side. "Two girls with nothing in common, who have engaged in at least two heavily-attended catfights involving water or mud, whose personalities--and body types--are different yet complimentary, placed in a situation where all they can do is work together. Maybe we can pull through!"

Narcissa eyes her. There is something bigger than Carmina at work here. Well, most things are bigger than Carmina, who, at an even five foot, relies on frightening spike heels simply to reach her bunk. But rather *metaphorically* bigger than Carmina. If Carmina were left to her own devices, Narcissa would be currently enduring some unbelievably nasty, low-class prattle, laced with uncreative insults and veiled threats, about every other girl in school. This -- Carmina's trembling, and her nightgown strap slipping precariously off her shoulder, and Narcissa's hair coming down from its bun in little white-gold strands -- this is *not normal*.

"I think we have to leave," Narcissa decides. "I think we have to get out of here."

"But what will happen to us?" Carmina's eyes are great big pools of trembling color, shaded by thick lashes, desperate for reassurance, guidance, perhaps even love. Narcissa feels a familiar twitch of revulsion in her stomach. She can conquer this. She *will* conquer this.

"We will be restored to normal," Narcissa says. "I think."

"What if someone sees us?" Carmina adds, almost pragmatically. "In our -- our negligees?"

"Then we will perform obliviate," Narcissa replies. "Well, *I* will perform obliviate. You will find clothes."

"All right," Carmina says. Disturbing as it is, her bust leads the way.

Something funny might just be going on, Peter is beginning to realize. "Hallo?" he asks the empty hallway. "Halloooo?" No one answers. His voice echoes back to him, sounding lonely and hollow. "That's strange," he says. "That's very strange." He wonders if, at any moment, Sirius will appear out of nowhere to pull his underwear up over his head. Or if James will pop out of a corner with a mask on like he did second year, so that Peter wets himself in front of the whole school. Friends. You can always rely on them. "Halloooo?" Peter calls again, opening the door to the third floor boys' bathroom. "Nobody in here, either." It occurs to him that he is talking to himself -- a cheerful narrative kept off to ward off the little shivers going down his spine -- and that, if anyone were to hear him, they might think him mad. "Hallo?" He asks for a forth time. *Hallo, hallo, hallo*, echoes the bathroom walls. "Well," Peter decides, "there's no one around to hear me talking to myself so I might as well just say it. This *is* spooky! And all the lights are out!" He fumbles along the wall, reaching for a familiar stall. Too much pumpkin juice, he reprimands himself. Never do that again, Petey, and without your wand to light the way. "Aha," he says, triumphantly, and swings the door open. "There we have it. Whoops!"

Something on the floor is slippery. He goes flying, headfirst, at the wall, and steadies himself only by the handle of the toilet flush, yanking it down hard. The toilet bowl gurgles, and then sinks below the floor. "Huh?" Peter says, very eloquently. Then, the wall in front of him swings back like a door.

"Hello, Mr. Pettigrew," Albus Dumbledore says.

"Er," Peter says. "What?"

"Ow," Sirius says, not very eloquently. "Moony, you're on my head, are they still coming?"

Remus strains desperately to see over his shoulder. Not that he really needs to see to know the answer; the rhythmic clanking, getting closer and closer, tells him all he needs to know. He can see, without having to see it, the impassive metal faces; the moonlight catching and dripping down the blade of an enormous battle axe--

No. *No*. This is completely ridiculous. First of all, there is no moonlight. It's about six-thirty, and even if it were night-time, it's raining too hard for moonlight, and even if there were moonlight, it couldn't *drip*, that's metaphorically absurd, and--

"This needs to stop!" Remus insists, not sure who he's talking to.



"We need to *run*!" Sirius reminds him. "Get off my head!"

The clanking and creaking approaches, inexorable, unstoppable, *really stupid*.

"Well," Sirius says miserably, "if you're not going to move -- *goodbye, old friend*. I shall miss your commas."

"No," Remus objects. "This is *too stupid to happen*."

"Tell that to them!" Sirius yelps. Remus looks up.

The suits of armor descend.

"Hah!" James yells, lunging forward and trapping a pumpkin -- one of the really small ones, the sort that James's parents bought for him on Muggle farms when he was five and six -- under his heel. "Say goodbye, squishy!"

From across the room, a fluffy sort of noise and a flash of pink light remind him to glance over his shoulder. "How's

it going, Evans?"

"Aren't they adorable?" Lily says happily, aiming her wand with deadly accuracy at a particularly menacing specimen halfway across the room and whispering something. The pumpkin gleeps, goes pink, and explodes -- into a rabbit.

"Rabbits?" James says doubtfully, hurling himself sideways and landing with a satisfying splat on another tiny warrior.

Lily shrugs. "Basic transfiguration. I was exploding them, but I started to feel guilty."

"How do you know they won't turn evil, too?" James asks. "I mean -- *die, die, die!* -- they're transfigured from, obviously, evil pumpkins."

"They're rabbits," Lily says. "They're *bunnies*. How evil can they be?"

"How evil can *pumpkins* be? *Die!*" It is, he must admit, very manly to be flinging himself bodily at the pumpkins trying to kill his fair lady-love. He is, if nothing else, very heroic. Covered in pumpkin seeds, smelling disturbing, and no doubt deranged, but heroic. Being heroic is very different from what he had at first imagined, in his bed, very young, dreaming of brave deeds. Still -- pumpkins or no pumpkins -- his heroics shall not go unnoticed.

"There," Lily says, just as James lands on a pumpkin with a satisfying squelch, "that's the last of them." She wipes hair out of her eyes, pockets her wand, and looks, James thinks through a haze of pumpkin orange, quite lovely despite it all.

"What are we going to do with the bunnies?" James asks, somewhat deliriously.

"Well," Lily says. "Well, that -- I hadn't thought -- they're *adorable*," she finishes lamely. "I mean. I'm sure someone will want them."

"If the pumpkins ever take their revenge we can offer them up as fluffy sacrifices. Just kidding!" James adds hurriedly, seeing the look of alarm on Lily's face. "A joke and all that. You can laugh now. Really."

Lily says nothing. James cringes, drawing himself up to his feet. His best shirt, ruined, no doubt forever, by the smell of deceased pumpkins. He aches all over -- he'll be the color of a smashed grape in the morning. It does all seem worth it, somehow. He will at least never forget this glorious day, impossible and nightmarish as it all was.

"Well," Lily says at last. "That's that, then. Isn't it."

James rubs his cheek awkwardly. "I suppose so."

"Listen," Lily murmurs dryly. "I've had a *lovely* time."

James laughs. Does he look as nervous as he feels? Does he have pumpkin dangling from his nose? Could his underwear *possibly* be any stickier? "I always know how to, ha ha, show a girl a time she'll, ha ha, never forget, ha. Ha."

"I mean it," Lily says.

She leans close.

"Didn't there used to be suits of armor along these walls?" Snape asks. He hates this school. He hates Kingsley Shacklebolt's bald head. He hates Kingsley Shacklebolt. He hates suits of armor. He hates James Potter and Sirius Black and Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew, just for good measure. He hates his life. He hates broccoli. He hates Hallowe'en. He hates this school. He hates being so full of hate that he repeats a hate in his mental list of things to hate.

Kingsley taps the side of his nose. "Follow the sound of armor," he says. "Smash, smash."

"AGH," Carmina screams. "AGH, AGH."

"What?" Narcissa demands, whirling on her.

"I broke a nail," Carmina whimpers.

Narcissa stares at her. "Now I remember," she says finally, "why I hate you."

"So," Peter says. "Do *you* know where everyone is? Because I just stopped in at the kitchens to preview the feast, you know, and now I can't find anyone! It's awfully strange."

"They're at my little party, I should think," Dumbledore says cheerfully. "Do have a seat. Would you like some candy?"

Peter edges into the hidden room and sits down across from Dumbledore's small desk in a tiny, tiny chair. He feels like a not-so-jolly giant, or an elephant riding a bicycle. "Er. All right?"

Dumbledore pushes something across the tiny desk to him. It is wrapped in yellow foil, and the flames from Dumbledore's tiny, tiny fireplace reflect off it onto the walls. "Congratulations, Mr. Pettigrew. You've solved the mystery."

"Was there a mystery?" Peter says, deeply confused.

Dumbledore sighs. "I admit, this was not how I was hoping this would end."

"What?" says Peter, eyes darting nervously around the room. "Who? Why are you in a toilet?"

Dumbledore sighs again. "Have you ever been to the muggle cinema, Mr. Pettigrew?"

"Oh, yes," Peter says, brightening. "I went with James and Sirius last summer but my mum doesn't like me going about with Muggles all the time so I've only seen a few."

"Well!" says Dumbledore cheerfully. "Then you might understand what I've done this year to celebrate the season. Have you had the opportunity to observe the way Muggle films are run? The formula upon which they operate?"

"Yes!" says Peter automatically. I have no idea what you're talking about.

"Very good. A film, like a book, is based upon a storyline--a very powerful sort of enchantment that controls everything that goes on. Are you following me?"

"Yes!" says Peter. I still have to pee.

“So this year, I thought it might be good fun to--er--put Hogwarts on a sort of storyline; to give the students some of the fun of experiencing the kind of Halloween that they’ve only read about or seen at the cinema. Well, half of them. The other half have been transported to the Great Hall, where they are already enjoying one of the best feasts I have ever seen prepared in my many, many years of observation.”.

“They’re eating without us?” gasps Peter, outraged.

“Ah, yes,” murmurs Dumbledore dryly. “At last, Mr. Pettigrew: a cause you can get behind.”

"Say your goodbyes!" Sirius moans. "Say your goodbyes *now*!"

"I don't -- see why -- I should do anything of the sort," Remus pants, trying to untangle his trousers from the visor of the helmet. "This is -- not going to -- *oof*--"

Above them, the leading suit of armor creaks to a start. It slowly, slowly raises its axe. A beam of light catches the blade and twinkles across it.

Sirius makes a high-pitched keening noise.

"Oi!" says someone from down the hallway. "What's this?"

The suit of armor twists around.

Kingsley is not having a good afternoon. He's been denied first practice on the pitch. He's had to drag Severus Snape around for a good three-quarters of an hour. Frank Longbottom has shone light on his head. And now there is a walking suit of armor apparently threatening his only fellow Beater, and the Halloween fun has officially come to an end.

"Is that Lupin and Black?" Snape says, sounding delighted. "Are they *on each other*?"

"Bugger off, Snape," yells the shape on the floor, which is definitely Sirius. "Kingsley, a little help?"

"Right," Kingsley says, and lumbers in.

"You know I haven't got stomach muscles," James whispers. Lily's pulpy skirt sticks to the palm of his hand.

There is a bunny nuzzling questioningly at his heel.

"I know," she says quietly.

"I have all the maturity of a seven-year-old in a toilet factory."

"I know."

"I'm frightened of *pumpkins*."

"James." Lily sounds relieved and fond and impatient, "*I can't sing.*"

James goggles at her. She slips her hand over his hand, which is still stuck to her skirt.

"I wish you would shut up," she murmurs.

Their mouths are very close.

"You are so mean," Carmina sniffles, examining the injured finger.

"You are *insufferable*," Narcissa hisses. "Of all the people to be stuck in some ridiculous farce with -- I'd rather be saddled with *Evans* than you!"

"Ooh!" Carmina shrieks, eyes going wide with outrage. "I cannot *believe* -- you stuck-up, glossy-haired *bitch*!"

Narcissa gasps. No one calls her names. *No one*. Because the Black family has *dignity* which is to be upheld *above all things*--

"I'm going to scratch your *face* off!" she screams, and hurls herself at Carmina.



"I didn't notice anything," Peter says doubtfully, still holding the candy awkwardly between two fingers. "Are you sure it worked?"

"Oh, yes," says Dumbledore blithely. "However, I believe that your total lack of imagination has, er, preserved you from its effects. It is exceedingly interesting. I was not aware that there was such a thing as a resistance to storyline--I was quite expecting to be cornered in here by a blood-drenched, wild-eyed fighter-type, as is to be expected--but you seem to have perfected it. Congratulations!"

"Oh," says Peter. I want to go home.

"Please do unwrap that sweet," Dumbledore says, and sighs.

"All right," Peter says.

"Be *careful*, Shackbolt!"

"Maybe you should get out of the way, Black."

"I *can't*! I'm trapped in a *helmet*! Why do you think I'm not running away, shrieking like a *little girl*?"

"That is a *broadsword*, Kingsley, if you don't mind oh my *God* I was less frightened when it was only the armor--"

"Duck, Lupin."

"I hate you all."

"I can't shut up. It's like a compulsion. I get in the same room with you and all of a sudden it's just like I have to talk *all the time*, and sometimes it's like I come right out of my body and I'm looking down at me and I just want to yell *shut up! Shut up! Shut up!* but--"

"Potter."

"...what?"

"I don't...think you should worry so much."

"Oh."

"Yes."

"Oh..."

"Tart!"

"Slag!"

"Vicious, classless little -- ow -- pygmy!"

"Snotty, gold-digging tramp -- *ooh* my hair!"

Peter unwraps it.

"I hate you all," Snape says again, emphatically. "I hate Black the most, actually, but it's a very close race and why don't we just round up and say you're *all* losers." He pauses. Blinks. Looks around him. Potions. Potions. More potions. A few empty vials, some tall-necked beakers, a bubbling cauldron. The sweet smell of wet stone and experiments in progress. He's back where he was before the entire evening exploded in some grand and disturbing social experiment. Snape flicks his hair over one shoulder, fingers twitching. "It *was* Black and Lupin," he mutters to himself. "On top of one another. *Poofters*."

"Unnngh," Kingsley says, exerting great effort. The broadsword is heavy, of course, and unwieldy, and strangely poky at one end, but he's got everything under control. Leave it to him. Situation: manageable.

"Wow," Frank says. "When did I end up in your arms, Kings? Your stomach is like *steel*. It is *more* than steel. No one is going to believe me but you are more mountain than man, mate."

Kingsley looks down at Frank, cradled heavy and unwieldy and strangely poky at one end between his own massive biceps. Half of the Quidditch team is watching on in bemused horror.

"And that," Kingsley says, "is how a Beater can save a Chaser's life midair."

Everyone bursts into applause.

"My money's on Narcissa," Bellatrix says calmly, sliding her bet across the bed to Ermine.

"I'm for Carmina all the way," Ermine replies. "Though she be but little, she kicks like a donkey."

James closes his eyes. This is the first kiss he's ever attempted that won't have involved far too much nervous lip-licking beforehand. Perhaps it won't be as wet as his others have been, few and far between as they were. Even when they were dating: few and far between. He takes a deep breath in. *Savor the moment, Potter. It's what your life has always led to! Never again doubt! Never again give up hope!* Lily smells like girl. Like tired, sweaty, pumpkin-flavored girl, but girl nonetheless, and all girl secrets, and all delightful, soft, curved, girl things. He presses one hand against her cheek and the other against her waist and presses his lips forward in a blind and half-angled fashion. Determination, he has decided, must make up for lack of skill. The moment is too perfect. There are even bunnies.

"Wow," a cheerful first year says, awed. "They're going to *kiss*, aren't they."

"I think so," one of the prefects says. "This is definitely *not* how *I* learned to carve a pumpkin."

Lily pulls back to the right; James, to the left. They knock heads so hard that James sees pumpkins. "Onghh," he groans. "Oh, my head."

"Well," Lily says, smoothing down the front of her skirt and bravely recalling a strange and foreign concept known as composure. "I'm going to take a bath. Remember, children: when carving pumpkins, always wear a pumpkin bib."

Remus has his eyes squeezed shut, curled around Sirius in the fetal position, waiting for the axe -- not even proverbial; the reality of it is that horrible to contemplate -- to fall. It doesn't. He tenses, feels Sirius clutch at his sweater. Seconds limp by. Nothing happens.

Remus cracks one eye open.

"Oh God," he says. "Sirius. Sirius. We're *not* going to die."

"Denial," Sirius moans miserably, "denial to the end. This is the Lupin way." Then he cracks one eye open and glances around. Very carefully, he untangles his arm from Remus's neck. "Oh," he says.

"Yes," Remus says. "Unless we die of embarrassment, which let me just say is not out of the question, we're not going to die."

"Hallo," Peter says cheerfully. The tower is full of Gryffindors, looking slightly dazed but extremely curious, and either Remus is hallucinating or Albus Dumbledore is standing over them. "Happy Halloween! I was in the bathrooms and I found a secret door. It's been Dumbledore! He made half the school disappear. Well, they didn't disappear. They've been at a party. But it was meant to scare everyone. And I solved the mystery and I've got us thirty points!"

"Well, boys?" Dumbledore says. "Happy Halloween!"

"It was a prank!" Peter says happily. "Haha!"

"Aha," Sirius says. Remus knows that voice. It is murderous. "Aha, ha ha ha."

"I do so love Halloween," Dumbledore murmurs blissfully. "Now, the festivities can *really* begin!"

Remus looks all around him. There are eyes everywhere: the burning, judging eyes of his peers. He remembers his first Halloween -- his first *real* Halloween, with Sirius and James and Peter in Hogwarts -- and James and Sirius wearing matching costumes, and Peter eating so much candy he was ill all over the floor, and having to clean up the mess while Sirius and James went stealing down the halls putting melted candy in front of every doorway so that there were far too many sticky-shoed students in the morning. This is just another one of those fond, fond, agonizing memories, to remind him, when he is an adult, and presumably past all this, that there were times when he felt very small and very red, like a prize winning tomato. Humility, he thinks, and the ability to take all things in stride.


However -- and he thinks Sirius will agree with him on this one -- right now, at this very instant, he would like the axe to fall.



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

 [dorkorific](#) specializes in **Sirius**;  [ladyjaida](#) specializes in **Remus**.

 [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.

all characters herein are the intellectual property of j.k. rowling, scholastic and warner brothers.

http://www.livejournal.com/community/shoebox_project