

# **The Kinnear Chronicles: The Thing in the Park**

by Joshua Sanofsky

# Copyright

The Kinneer Chronicles: The Thing in the Park

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## Author's Note

This short story takes place - for those keeping track of Alys's timeline - on June 1st, 1986, about a month and a half after her fight with Brenna at the end of *Family Ties*. It was originally going to be the opening of the second book, which was going to be called *Seasons of Healing* and show how Alys recovered from both the physical and psychic injuries sustained during the fight. Unfortunately, most of the rest of the book refused to gel, and aside from a rather entertaining section at the end of the book about Alys & Co. spending Yule with her mother and Jonathan Tremane - which will become another short story - I just couldn't make it work.

Maybe Alys didn't want this part of her life to be public knowledge, or maybe my writing skills just aren't up to the task yet. Maybe I'd just had enough of writing Alys battered and damaged at the end of *Family Ties*. Maybe I'll come back to it someday and tell that part of Alys's story, when she and I are both ready to reveal the unpleasant details of it.

In the meantime, here's an extended glimpse into her life during the time she was recovering from the beating she took at Brenna's hands. Hope you enjoy it.

## Chapter 1

It had rained the night before, so in a way we were in luck. The soft, wet ground had taken tracks magnificently, and the policeman who dropped me off had mentioned that the forensics team had been able to take good clear castings of the strange prints they'd found.

Unfortunately, it meant that I nearly had to yank my new ironwood cane free of the muddy ground several times as I limped across the park towards Ben. My right knee ached fiercely, and I was beginning to realize that rainy days were going to be bad for a while. Based on that and the ominous clouds overhead, we were probably due for a fresh downpour any moment.

Ben glanced over, saw me coming and lifted a hand in greeting. I returned his wave with my free left hand and plodded on towards him. I silently reminded myself that he hadn't chosen the location, nor had he made it rain, and it certainly wasn't his fault that my knee had been almost completely demolished barely a month earlier. Nor was it his fault that I'd had physical therapy earlier that morning, and was already tired and sore.

Oh boy. I was in a cranky mood.

Suck it up, Alys. Ben deserves the very best you can bring to the table, so get with it.

Dr. MacMoran had assured me that I'd regain full control of my emotions again as my mind healed from Brenna's psychic attack. It had already gotten easier to control them, but some days were worse than others. I categorically refused to let this - my first time actually working since returning to London - be one of those days.

Ben seemed to sense my mood and gave me an apologetic smile. "Sorry for having to call you all the way to Swindon, love." He bent and gave me a little kiss as I finally reached him. "This is a really weird one, and I need a specialist."

In all honesty, he probably didn't. Granted, he didn't know as much about the supernatural in general and magic specifically as I did, but he was really good at this job. One did not achieve the rank of Detective Inspector in New Scotland Yard without being at least competent...and Ben was better than that.

But he knew how desperately I wanted to get my life back to normal (or what passed for normal for a wizard-in-training), and that meant working.

He was such a sweetheart.

I looked up at him and put what I hoped was a convincing smile on my face. "It was only an hour and a half drive. And you did send a car for me, so I'm not going to complain. What've you got?"

Artemis brushed against my left leg as she passed by on silent paws, head down as she sniffed at the wet grass. <<Strange scent,>> she reported. <<Gonna track it.>>

"Don't go far," I replied.

"Did she pick up a scent?" Ben asked as Artemis continued away from us, her tail swishing slowly.

Athena came up on the other side of him and nodded. "I'll go with her, just in case."

"Good idea." I watched her hurry to catch up with Artemis, moving with none of the stiffness that I still felt. I was pleased that she'd recovered from her injuries so completely, and smiled as I saw her tail swaying jauntily behind her as she strode away from us.

The peace and alertness I felt from her were a good reminder of how centered I should be right now.

I caught Ben watching Athena too, and was amused. Granted, it was quite a sight...Athena, like most Elevated female familiars, tended to prefer dressing in clothes that were functional and protected the places where her fur was thinnest, while still being stylish in their own way. This meant that her usual daily outfit was a sleeveless leather bodysuit (lined with a blade-resistant fabric and reinforced with thin, flexible striking plates) and thigh-high leather stockings (similarly reinforced) which left her feet mostly bare for better traction.

While her feet are very much human in appearance, their soles are more like a cat's paws, with tough pads and retractable claws for toenails. With all that added traction, she can move over even the worst terrain almost effortlessly.

It's pretty cool.

"Are you sure I can't convince you to dress like that?" Ben asked wistfully.

"I've already told you," I shot back lightly, "I will if you will."

I wondered what he'd think if he knew I was wearing a nearly identical outfit under my street clothes pretty much all the time since I'd gotten out of the hospital. I didn't feel quite safe without them anymore. Dr. MacMoran had assured me that it wasn't an unreasonable precaution to take, nor an unhealthy one.

Ben glanced down at me - I'm a full head shorter than he is - and his shoulders relaxed a little when he saw the teasing smile on my face.

"So," I repeated, "what've you got?"

"A couple of kids - teenagers on a date - were stalked by some kind of predator here last night," Ben said, gesturing towards a boy and a girl sitting on a bench not far from where we stood, with their parents hovering protectively behind them.

"They were sitting on the swings over there," Ben continued, nodding towards a swing set that was currently surrounded by a Yard forensics team, "and could just see the creature out beyond the edge of the light thrown by the lamp above it."

I let my gaze drift from the swing set and saw Artemis sniffing at the ground near where the forensics team was pouring plaster into a squared off mold. "Footprints?" I asked.

"All over the place," Ben confirmed. "Most of them in a circle about fifteen yards out from the swings, but there's a trail that leads from the woods and back." He pointed to the dense-looking woods at the eastern edge of the field.

"Human, or inhuman?" I asked.

"Humanoid," Ben replied unhelpfully. "Maybe. The footprints look sort of humanish, and there's what looks like knuckle prints here and there...but it also looks like something heavy was being pushed ahead of the prints. Anyway, they're not a type I'm familiar with, which is why I called you. I was hoping you would be."

"Bugger," I muttered. As much as I hated the unpredictability of a human killer and the inherent dangers of an inhuman one, dealing with a humanoid - a creature of roughly human shape and appearance - could be more difficult than either. Few human-sized creatures were more dangerous than the ones that looked human, but had no human morals or ethics...especially if they were sufficiently close to human appearance that they could blend into crowds easily.

Of course, plenty of human-shaped killers that lack human morality turn out to actually be human. I suppose they might qualify as 'humanoid' too.

"Well," I sighed, "I'll take a look at them. I'd like to talk to the kids first, though."

Kids. I shouldn't call them that. They probably weren't even ten years younger than

me.

Ben smiled. "I was hoping you'd want to. They've been...not actually uncooperative, but it's obvious they're not comfortable talking to me or other adults about it."

I gave him a sideways look. Athena, standing near Artemis, glanced over.

Ben held up his hands defensively. "You're an adult. I didn't mean to imply otherwise. But you're a lot closer to their age than anyone else here."

Athena turned her attention back to what Artemis was doing. I thought I saw her smirking.

"You were in danger of losing certain privileges there for a moment," I said with mock severity.

Ben mimed wiping sweat from his forehead. "Whew. I'll be more careful in the future."

Deciding I'd teased him enough for the moment, I shifted my cane to my left hand so I could take his hand in my right, twining our fingers together. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure they'll talk to me."

His answering smile warmed me down to my toes. "Of course they will. You're a lot cooler than the rest of us old fogeys, too."

"Damn straight," I replied with a nod. "But it's nice of you to say."

That was roughly the point where someone watching us might've started to get a little nauseated, so by mutual unspoken consent we eased back on the flirting and got down to work.

"While I talk to the witnesses," I liked that better than 'kids', "why don't you see what Artemis has found?"

"Will Athena translate for me?" Ben asked hopefully. "I don't speak cat."

My lips twitched as I resisted the urge to smile. Okay, maybe a little more teasing. "I'm sure she can be convinced to."

He smiled and squeezed my hand before releasing it and heading off towards where Artemis was sniffing at the ground. Athena, I noticed, had bent to examine something. Probably one of the footprints.

<<Something weird?>> I asked Athena telepathically.

<<Amazingly,>> she replied without looking up. <<This is definitely not human, and I think Ben's stretching the definition of 'humanoid' to its breaking point.>>

<<Hmm. I'll come look at it in a few minutes. Will you let Ben know what Artemis has found?>>

Her reply was laced with a warm affection that was very close to the love she felt for me. <<Of course, Alys. You don't need to ask.>>

I smiled. She and Artemis were developing an easy, affectionate relationship with Ben playing the big brother. It was quite a lot of fun to watch, and reassured me that he was a good fit for us.

I shook off my musings about my boyfriend...now was absolutely not the right time for it. My head must've been more scrambled than I'd thought it was if I was getting that distracted by Ben at a crime scene. I was usually much more professional than this.

Squaring my shoulders and giving my head a little shake to finish clearing it, I shifted my cane back to my right hand and limped across the field towards the two teenagers. It was a surprisingly chilly morning for early June - it had been a rather cool and dreary spring, and summer was having a hard time getting a grip on the weather - and the rain the night before

had left a light fog drifting everywhere. I was glad I'd chosen to throw on my long brown leather coat over my jeans, high-necked green shirt and leather ankle boots.

Elsie, as usual, had been right about the weather. I made a mental note to thank her when I got home. I was nice and warm and dry.

The teenagers, on the other hand, looked tired and miserable. They appeared to be about sixteen or seventeen and were dressed a lot like I was, except they didn't have even light jackets on and looked chilly. I hoped the similarity of our dress - compared to Ben's more professional slacks and jacket and the police officers' uniforms - would make it easier for them to open up to me.

I'd like to claim that it was done intentionally to set people at ease with me, but honestly I'm just more comfortable when I'm dressed casually. It also keeps the inconvenience of dry-cleaning to a minimum. Jeans can be thrown out and replaced inexpensively when they're covered in some nasty goo encountered while working; more upscale clothing can't be.

"Hi there," I said as I approached them. "My name is Alys Kinnear, I'm a mage consultant working with Detective Donovan. I was hoping I could have a few minutes of your time."

Their parents were watching me with a mixture of confusion and uncertainty, looks that I was getting used to. I don't really look like a traditional mage training to be a wizard. I grew up in rural Eire, outside Killarney, and I've never put on any of the (somewhat eccentric) airs and affectations that many wizards favor for impressing and intimidating clients. I don't wear robes, I don't sew mystical symbols into my clothes in glittering metallic thread, I don't favor large, pointy hats. And obviously, I don't have a beard.

Partly that's my old teacher Jonathan Tremane's fault. He never dressed in 'traditional' Hermetic wizard-wear either, favoring his own brand of eccentricity: black fedoras, cloaks and coats, and red scarves. He was nuts for *The Shadow* pulp novels.

Partly it was my mom's fault. She's a druidess and not at all traditional by their standards, dressing in much the same way I do...for comfort and utility.

In other words, with my leather coat, jeans and cane, I didn't exactly present the textbook image of a practicing wizard-in-training. Or any other kind of spellcaster, for that matter.

But it obviously put the teens at ease. They looked up at me, the girl smiling uncertainly as the boy said, "I'm Tom. This is Liz."

I smiled. "Hi Tom, Liz." I looked up at their parents. "I need to ask them some questions about what they saw last night. It'll help me get a handle on what was here and what we can do to track it down and stop it. Could you give us a few minutes?" Translation: I'm a trained professional and you're making your kids uncomfortable. Please let me do my work.

They looked at one another, and one of the mothers looked like she was going to object before her husband took her arm and led her away. The other father nodded to me and gently led his wife away as well. Interesting family dynamics there I was never impressed by subservient women, but I was just as glad not to have to argue with them. I nodded my thanks as they moved away, then carefully sat down beside Liz.

"So," I said quietly, pitching my voice to show friendly concern, "what happened last night?"

Tom and Liz looked at one another for a moment before Liz met my eyes and started

to speak.

“There was a school dance last night,” she began, “so we were there until a little after ten. We didn’t feel like going home, so we walked around for a while, then came here.” She blushed a bit, and I understood. They’d probably found some dark corner somewhere, but nothing in their body language suggested more than a bit of heavy snogging.

It was none of my business anyway, unless their stalker turned out to be attracted to that sort of thing. “Did you notice what time you got here?” I asked, taking out a small black notebook and a pen.

Liz shook her head a little, but Tom nodded. “It was just before midnight,” he said quietly. “We were both pretty wound up and didn’t feel like going home, and it wasn’t raining anymore, so we sat on the swings and talked for a while.”

I wrote that down in my notebook. “How long were you here before you saw it?”

They exchanged another look. “An hour or two?” Liz asked Tom.

Tom nodded. “Probably about two. I looked at my watch afterwards and it was about 1:50 in the morning.”

I jotted that down. “Okay. Can you tell me what it looked like?”

“We didn’t really get a clear look at it,” Liz said hesitantly. I heard the quaver in her voice and saw the fear in her eyes. Whatever it was, it had rattled her.

It had rattled *them*, I corrected myself. Tom looked pretty pale too.

“I tried sending a fairy light towards it, but it didn’t do much good,” he said.

Fairy lights are one of the basic, cross-tradition spells that everyone with magical talent learns in school. Since the majority of the population these days has at least enough magical talent to light a candle, just about everyone knows how to cast fairy lights. They’re not bright and don’t last very long without constant concentration, but they’re sufficient to read by or see a path by...about as bright as a candle flame.

But they’re not really enough to see clearly with at a distance of more than about five or six feet.

“That’s all right,” I told him reassuringly. “Tell me what you saw, even if it was just impressions. Anything you can remember might help.”

“It was black,” Tom said without hesitation. “Or some other really dark color,” he amended after a moment, “because it was really hard to see at first.”

“It stayed right at the edge of the light from the lamp,” Liz added, pointing to the pole-mounted electric lamp that stood to one side of the swing set. “Out in the shadows, you know?”

“It looked kinda like it was moving on its belly,” Tom said, “pushing itself along, sort of, with its face to the grass.”

“I don’t know if it had arms, but if it did it wasn’t using them, or had them tucked in against its sides or something,” Liz said.

“I couldn’t see arms either,” Tom agreed, “but we could see its legs. They were...I don’t know...backwards.”

“Backwards?” I asked curiously, taking notes.

“Yeah,” Liz said, “like...it was on its belly, but its knees were pointing towards the sky, and it was moving slowly by pushing itself along first with one leg, then the other. We could see them going up and down?”

“How do you know it wasn’t on its back, then?” I asked, keeping my voice carefully questioning. I didn’t want them to think I was implying any disbelief or doubt. I believed

every word they were saying. They were simply too scared to be lying.

“Because it lifted its head to look at us,” Liz whispered, hugging herself and shivering.

Tom wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “It really did. It was pointed towards us, and its head came up off the ground. I could barely make out a face, but I couldn’t see any eyes. If it had eyes, they weren’t reflecting the light. You know, like a cat’s?”

I nodded and wrote that down. “Anything else?”

They both shook their heads.

“We took off running at that point,” Liz admitted.

“It sounded like it was chasing us until we reached the edge of the park,” Tom added. “There was a weird slapping-shuffling sound behind us the whole way.”

“And once you left the park it stopped?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Tom replied. “One second I was hearing that weird sound behind me, and the next we were out in the street and it had stopped.”

“I couldn’t hear it all that well,” Liz admitted. “Tom was behind me, so mostly I just heard him.”

“That’s all right,” I said with a smile. “You’ve given me a lot of good information. Thank you both very much.”

They both returned my smile, and if theirs were a bit shaky, they were at least smiling. I rose stiffly, pushing myself to my feet with my cane and blowing out a little breath once I was standing. My right knee throbbed unpleasantly and sent a little stab of pain down into my foot and up into my hip, as if to ask why I was doing this to it on a rainy day.

“Are you okay?” Liz asked quietly.

I smiled at her, a little surprised. “I’m all right. I’m still recovering from some recent injuries, and my knee has apparently decided it’s not going to like rainy days. But thanks for asking.”

She returned my smile, her expression one of curiosity and what I thought was admiration...and for a moment, I wondered what I must look like from her perspective, compared to the professional-looking police: my casual (and, after the ride from London, slightly rumpled) clothes, the fact that I was leaning on an unusual but elegant-looking cane, my paler-than-usual skin and the dark circles under my eyes - I hadn’t been sleeping well - all added up to...what?

A young woman who was consulting for Scotland Yard in spite of being only 24 years old and who had - I’d been told - an aura of quiet power around her. One who was recovering from recent injuries, and who had arrived with not one familiar but two, one of whom was Elevated.

I hoped I was a good role model.

I dug in a pocket of my coat and handed her one of the business cards Hollis had made for me, then gave one to Tom as well. “That’s a phone number where I can be reached...and if I’m not there, they’ll know how to find me. If you think of anything else, call. Okay?”

They both nodded.

I smiled. “Good. Thank you again.”

I shook Liz and Tom’s hands warmly, then limped off across the park towards Ben and Athena. They were standing together on the other side of the swing set, watching Artemis following a trail of flattened grass that led towards the trees.

“That’s the way it went?” I asked as I approached them.

“The way it arrived,” Ben corrected. “There’s a second trail just like it a few yards to our left, but with footprints facing towards the trees.”

“Those footprints might not be a reliable indicator of what direction it was moving in,” I warned. “You were right, this is a weird one.”

“What did they see?” he asked.

I told him what Tom and Liz had related to me, from start to finish. He listened in silence, taking it all in and evidently trusting that I already had it all written down.

“The way they describe it,” Athena said thoughtfully when I was finished, “it almost sounds like this thing has chosen the park as a hunting ground.”

“That is what it sounds like,” I agreed.

Ben sighed. “Our next step then should be trying to find it tonight.” He turned a little and gave me a winning smile. “Care to join me on a stakeout, Mage Kinnear?”

“Sounds delightful,” I said dryly, glancing pointedly up at the sky. It was still threatening rain. “I should have a look at the footprints.”

<<Clear one here, Alys-sister,>> Artemis said from several feet away, looking over her shoulder at me.

I carefully settled to my left knee beside her, resting my hand on her shoulders and ruffling her fur a little as I looked at the indicated print. It was firmly embedded in a long trail of flattened grass and muddy earth, where it did indeed look like something had been pushed or dragged along the ground. The print was longer and wider than a human foot, but definitely the same shape as one. Except...

“Are those claw marks?” I asked. At the end of each toe-print was a gouged indentation, as if a curved blade had dug into the ground and been pulled out again.

<<Think so,>> Artemis replied quietly. <<Big claws.>>

Behind me, I heard Athena whispering...probably telling Ben what Artemis had said.

“That’s what they look like to me too,” Ben agreed a moment later. “The plaster casting should be coming up in another five or ten minutes. If there were decent enough claw holes for it to fill in, we’ll find out for sure.”

I planted my cane firmly on the ground, wrapped my fingers around the grip - which was shaped like a sprinting snow leopard - got my right leg under me and started to rise. I was putting most of my weight on the cane...which immediately sank two inches into the soft, wet earth, throwing me off balance.

Instinctively, I shifted my weight back to my right leg. The spike of pain from my knee made me gasp, and I ended up back where I’d started, kneeling behind Artemis and leaning on her for balance.

Artemis pressed up against my side reassuringly, her concern and sympathy flowing into me as I swore under my breath in Gaelic.

“Why aren’t you wearing your knee brace?” Ben asked as he and Athena got their hands under my arms and lifted me gently to my feet.

“Trish said I could go without it today if I was careful,” I said through clenched teeth, leaning on them as I lifted and slowly flexed my knee. The pain was already fading...I hadn’t done any damage to it. It just wasn’t up to snuff yet.

“Trish didn’t know you were going to be tromping around in a damp field,” Athena said dryly.

“Neither did I,” I shot back, turning a little to glare at her.

She lowered her head slightly, meeting my eyes. <<Calm,>> she murmured, almost inaudibly, and her centered emotions flowed over me.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, smothering my irrational anger. <<Thank you. Sorry, sister.>>

She smiled a little. <<No need.>> “It’s a good thing I put it in the bag before we left.”

Ben had mentioned the case might keep us here overnight, so we’d put a few extra things in my bottomless bag before leaving. I hadn’t seen her add my knee brace, but I was very glad she had. “Thanks.” I steadied myself and plucked my cane from where it was still standing a couple of inches deep in the ground. “I’m all right now.”

Athena nodded and released my left arm. Rather than releasing my right, Ben shifted so that my arm was linked with his, still supporting some of my weight. It was a courtly gesture, and one which made me feel warm inside. His silent, uncomplaining and unconditional support was as reassuring as that of my familiars.

I was honestly amazed at times by his willingness to weather my worse days and moods without complaint. Athena and Artemis were integral to my healing, helping me find my way back from the worst moments by being there to remind me of who I was. But they were parts of me, as I was of them...their help had, in a way, been expected (but never unappreciated).

Ben took it on without a word of complaint, because...I still wasn’t sure why. But he never tried to offer advice, never told me to calm down, never told me I was being unreasonable. He expressed concern, reassurance and confidence in me simply by being there to help when I needed him. He, Athena and Artemis were the rocks on which my emotional storms crashed, broke, and finally calmed.

They made me feel very special indeed.

“Come on,” Ben said, “I took the liberty of booking a couple of rooms at a cozy little B&B not far from here. We can have some lunch and then lay our plans for this evening.”

## Chapter 2

After a quick lunch at a cafe we found, we made our way to the little bed and breakfast that Ben had reserved us rooms in. As he'd indicated it was absolutely charming. The sitting room we gathered in to make our war plans was decorated in a pseudo-Victorian style, with lots of rich, dark woods and warm colors.

I had been placed - with seemingly careless perfection on the part of Athena and Ben - in an overstuffed chair by the fireplace with my legs stretched out on a footstool. I had somehow ended up positioned so that my right knee was closest to the warmth of the fire, easing the sore muscles and tendons without anyone having to make a production of finding a heating wrap for me.

They were so considerate of my feelings that I was a little embarrassed by my humiliation at needing help sometimes.

<<All part of our grand plan,>> Athena said with a teasing smile as she handed me a steaming mug of tea. <<You're not alone anymore...you're part of a team. After all, if any of us were hurt, you'd be just as invested in our recovery, yes?>>

<<Of course,>> I replied without even thinking about it, then sighed. <<I'm being a self-centered prat.>>

<<Only a little. It'll pass. We're going to embarrass you into not being embarrassed by needing help once in a while.>> She kissed the top of my head, then went to sit beside Artemis in front of the fire.

Ben watched this silent exchange with obvious amusement, right up until I turned my now-knowing gaze on him.

"What?" he asked, smiling.

"Embarrass me into not being embarrassed by needing help?"

"Snitched on me, did she?" he asked lightly.

I nodded.

"It's a good plan, no?"

I sighed. "Yes, and it's starting to work."

"Thank goodness," Athena murmured.

Ben chuckled softly, and after a moment I realized I was chuckling with him.

Artemis made a disgruntled sound. <<People make things too complicated. Alys-sister needs a push sometimes, that's all.>>

<<It's a good thing I have you and Athena to keep me on the right path, then.>>

Artemis purred. <<Yes. Alys-sister shows great wisdom now.>>

I laughed.

"Come on, share," Ben said, smiling.

I related Artemis's comments to him, and he laughed. "It's hard to go wrong following Artemis's advice."

Artemis purred louder. <<Alys-sister's mate is also wise.>>

I almost choked on my tea. Athena giggled behind her hand.

Ben raised his eyebrows expectantly.

I shook my head. "Nope, not relaying that one."

Ben grinned, then sat back down in the chair across from mine. "So, any thoughts on our possible predator?"

I shook my head again. "Not as such. I'm not even sure it'll qualify as humanoid, really."

Ben considered that for a moment, then shrugged. "We'll see. I mean, we barely know anything about it yet. We can't even be sure it's contained within the park."

"At best, that's probably a self-imposed limitation," Athena said.

I nodded my agreement. "I, for one, am not up to going tromping in the woods in the rain. Not yet, anyway. I say we try to lure it out and get a better idea of what it is."

"I'm going to assume you don't mean asking those kids to sit on the swings after midnight again," Ben said. "And I don't know that you and I can pass for a couple of lovesick teenagers."

"You can," Athena said lightly without turning from where she was idly petting Artemis.

I smirked a little and then cleared my throat. "The last time we acted as bait didn't go so well," I said pointedly and looked at Ben. "What should we do differently this time?"

Ben smiled faintly. "Honestly, we didn't do anything wrong last time other than underestimate our quarry." His smile faded into a sad expression. "It's just a shame that the Thames Slasher ghost killed three of the five detectives we had shadowing us."

Sadness washed over me. Three people had died and two had been injured because of my plan. "That might've been why you lived, though," I said, trying to find a bright spot in that dark evening. "It had burned through a lot of energy by the time it reached you."

Athena turned a little to look at me and frowned. "That was not your fault, sister."

"It was my idea - "

Ben cut me off. "And it wasn't a bad idea," he said firmly, then smiled lopsidedly and not very happily. "It was an unusual situation."

"Isn't every monster hunt?" I asked.

"Actually, no," Ben said, picking up the mug of tea Athena had brought for him and sipping it. "Most of them go pretty smoothly if they have as many spotters as we had. The Slasher's ghost - guided by Brenna - was considerably more powerful and unpredictable than we anticipated." He sighed. "Things like that happen."

"So how can we know - "

"We can't," Ben cut me off again, gently this time. "But while we're dealing with another unknown here, and you're not completely up to snuff, you can't let one failure rattle you like this. We've seen no indication that this thing is openly hostile. With Athena and Artemis backing us up, and maybe a couple of local cops within calling distance, we'll be fine."

"So," I said slowly, "It's you and I for the swings, with Artemis and Athena lying in wait?"

<<Artemis does not want to get wet.>> She lifted her head from her forepaws and turned to give me the sort of nasty look that only a cat can muster. The sort that freezes prey animals in place and wilts plants.

"I'm not too keen on wet fur either," Athena added, rubbing her lightly furred arms and pretending to shiver.

The weather chose that moment to let us know what it thought of their concerns. Thunder rumbled restlessly somewhere overhead.

Athena sighed and Artemis flopped over on her side with a little groan.

Ben smiled teasingly. "You two could always stay here..."

“That’s not going to happen,” Athena said firmly. “Not ever.”

<<Artemis will put up with rain to help Alys-sister,>> Athena agreed - perhaps a bit reluctantly - from where she was now sprawled on her back, forepaws curled in. She looked like an overgrown kitten when she did that.

I chuckled softly. “I didn’t expect anything else.”

“Nor I, really,” Ben agreed, smiling. “Besides, there’s a gazebo not too far from the swings. You can use that as your base of operations.”

Artemis looked relieved. Athena nodded contentedly and turned back to the fire.

I sipped my tea. “So, we try to lure it out into the open in the hopes of getting a better look at it. Even if we can’t do more than that tonight, having a look at it will give us something to work with.”

“I just wish we knew why it stopped chasing them at the edge of the park.” Ben ran his fingers through his short brown hair. “If we don’t see anything tonight, I might have to hit the woods tomorrow in force, whether I like it or not.”

I grimaced a little.

Ben smiled gently. “You don’t have to come,” he said. “I’ll bring Yard and local police with me. We can have a couple more police mages up here by noon tomorrow.”

I shook my head firmly. “If it comes to that, I’m not going to let this,” I tapped my right knee lightly with one finger, “stop me from doing my job.”

Ben smiled a bit more, and I felt relief from my sisters.

“Well, it probably won’t even come to that,” Ben said confidently. “I’m sure we’ll deal with it tonight, or at least learn enough about it to figure out our next steps.”

“Do we catch, or kill?” Athena asked, leaning back against my footstool and looking up at Ben. She had a drowsy look on her face...evidently she was being lulled into a sleepy state by the heat of the fire. She might look almost like my identical twin, but there was still a lot of snow leopard in her. I wouldn’t have it any other way.

Artemis, of course, was already dozing. She was probably taking in every word we said anyway.

“Catch,” Ben replied, then took a sip of his tea. “If it’s safe and possible to do so. Kill if not.”

“Shouldn’t we just kill it and make sure it can’t hurt anyone?” I asked, irritated. “Why risk it?”

Artemis opened her eyes and craned her head a little to look at me. Athena tipped her head back and frowned up at me.

Ben frowned across at me, looking confused. “Capture is always preferable, especially if it turns out to be intelligent. You know that. For all we know, it’s perfectly harmless and was just curious about those kids. It might not have meant to scare them at all.”

“Things that lurk in the dark and have claws like that are rarely harmless,” I argued. “We should be prepared to try to stop this thing, whatever it is, before it does anything more serious than - “

I broke off as Athena reached up and touched my ankle lightly. <<This isn’t you...be calm...>>

I frowned down at her and took stock of myself. I realized that I was flushed, angry, and my heart was thudding in my chest. With an effort, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as I counted to ten. Then I did it again, ignoring soft rustles of movement around me.

I tuned out everything, concentrating on the rhythm of my breathing and slowing my pulse. I felt the reassuring calm presences of Athena and Artemis in my mind, helping me focus and center myself.

After a couple of minutes I felt calm and normal again. When I opened my eyes, Ben was crouched beside my chair, watching me closely.

“Are you all right?” he asked quietly.

I nodded, embarrassed. “Sorry. It’s been a week since the last time that happened.”

“Lingering after-effects of Brenna’s spell?”

Athena stretched and turned to face us, nodding. “It happens sometimes, but it’s getting better.”

Ben took my hand and squeezed it gently. “When’s the last time you slept well?”

I shrugged a little. “I don’t know. Probably before I was injured, unless you count the time I spent sedated in the hospital.”

He leaned in and gave me a little kiss. “Well, you can rest for a while this afternoon if you’d like.”

“Once we finish planning...”

“I think we’re pretty much done,” Athena said with a smile. “Of course, that last comment of yours was a bit underhanded. After all, I have claws and lurk in the darkness sometimes.”

I laughed and reached out with my free hand to caress her cheek gently. “Sorry, sis.”

<<Thing’s behavior was predatory,>> Artemis interjected, closing her eyes and yawning. <<Smell was wrong, too. Not natural. Even Brenna’s familiars smelled natural...this didn’t.>>

Athena repeated Artemis’s comments to Ben as I let my head drop back against the chair’s cushions. Reining in my little uncontrolled emotional burst had left me feeling drained, and I was already tired from the early morning physical therapy, not sleeping well, and...

The next thing I knew I was waking up in a darkened room. I was stretched full-length on a bed, lying on my left side with my head on a soft pillow. A warm body was pressed against my back and an arm was draped lightly around my waist, and I was positive they didn’t belong to Athena.

No breasts, for starters. Also, too tall.

Ben? Who else could it be. As far as I could tell we were both still fully dressed - I was, at least, and assumed that he was too.

That was a shame.

“You awake?” he asked quietly, his voice rumbling in my ear.

“Mhm,” I replied sleepily. “Did you take advantage of a sleeping woman?”

“Yup,” he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. “I’m a terrible fiend. How’re you feeling now?”

I took stock. I was warm, comfortable, pleasantly relaxed and still a bit fuzz-brained from sleep. Oh, and my right knee didn’t hurt. That was good.

“Better,” I admitted. “And I think I could stay right here forever.”

He chuckled quietly. “Nah. You’d get bored after a while.” He hugged me gently. “It’s about eight in the evening. You slept almost half the day. You really haven’t been sleeping well, have you?”

I shook my head a little. “No. Sometimes I can’t relax enough to sleep, though the

meditation trick you saw me use to regain my self-control before has helped some. Other times I have pretty bad nightmares and can't get back to sleep afterwards." I paused for a moment, then sighed and admitted, "I haven't really had a full night's sleep since I woke up in the hospital. I think this is the first time I've slept any length of time without having a nightmare."

Ben made a thoughtful sound. "That sounds to me like a good excuse to start sleeping together."

I knew he was only half joking and I laughed softly. I hadn't done a lot of laughing over the last month or so...not nearly as much as I had previously, and it felt good. "Maybe it is," I agreed, letting my voice sober. Then I very intentionally and purposefully shifted and stretched against him.

Ben tensed and froze in place, making a little sound that I was coming to translate as somewhere between desire and frustration.

I grinned and relaxed again. If I were Athena, I'd've been purring.

"You know it drives me crazy when you do that," he complained jokingly.

"I know," I said, then slowly sat up and stretched again, lifting and bending my right knee carefully. Then I did a few of the stretches Trish had shown me. By the time I was done, my knee felt almost normal again.

Ben had sat up beside me to watch. As I finished, he wrapped an arm around my waist and pressed a soft kiss behind my ear. "Okay now?"

I shivered pleasantly. I'd had no idea my ears were sensitive until the first time Ben had kissed one. "Functional," I said with a smile. "I think I'll put on my knee brace tonight, just in case. How'd you convince Artemis and Athena to leave us alone?"

"It was Athena's idea, actually," Ben replied with a smile. "For some reason, she thought maybe having me here would help you sleep better. They watched over us for a while, then left about an hour ago to take another look around the park. Athena said they'd go into the edge of the woods a little too, before the sun went down completely."

I mentally reached out and felt their reassuring presences, not close by but still very strong. Athena felt disappointed and Artemis felt bored.

"I don't think they found much," I reported to Ben. "Artemis is bored."

Ben chuckled softly and gave me a little hug. "I didn't think they'd find anything at all before full dark, but it never hurts to look. It rained for a while this afternoon, but it stopped about a half-hour before they left. The sky isn't clearing though, so..."

"So there'll probably be more rain before the night is through," I finished for him, swinging my legs over the side of the bed and rising slowly. My right knee felt okay for now, but I was relieved to find my cane leaning against the bedside table.

"We can grab a late dinner at one of the pubs in town, then go fool around on the swings," Ben said, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

I smiled and headed for the door. "I want to change my shirt for something that'll be warmer at night, put on my knee brace and grab the rest of my gear."

Ben nodded and clipped a clamshell holster onto his belt, holding the compact Magearm pistol he usually carried when he was working. The Magearm was designed to channel Anima quickly and easily into a prepared spell matrix (he, like most police, favored lightning) and fire the spell as if it were being cast normally. It couldn't do complex spells, but it could do simple combat spells really well, really fast, and really efficiently. So I didn't tease him about it much.

Instead of the sports jacket he'd been wearing earlier, he put on a short brown leather jacket. "Mind if I come with you?" he asked in his most innocent voice.

I considered the question for a moment, decided I was still feeling playful, and opened the door. "Sure. Come on."

I must've caught him flat-footed, because it took him a moment to catch up to me. I had already opened the door to my room, and we went inside together.

Ben closed the door behind us as I asked, "Did the forecast say what the temperature tonight is supposed to be?"

"High 40s to low 50s," he replied, "And probably wet. Woah!" He turned away from me suddenly, and I thought I saw a hint of a blush on his neck.

I had half of the buttons on my shirt undone before he'd realized what I was doing. He, of course, had no idea I wore a lightly armored (and lightly enchanted) leather bodysuit identical to Athena's beneath my clothes. A safe practical joke that doubles as flirtation is an opportunity not to be missed.

I grinned impishly and deftly tossed my shirt so that it landed on top of his head, draping down over his face.

"You have no shame," he said in a muffled voice.

"Very little," I agreed, "at least about my body. Oh, come on, it's perfectly safe for you to turn around."

He pulled my shirt off his head slowly, glanced over his shoulder, then turned to face me. "I thought you were joking when you said you'd be willing to wear one of those."

"Well, I wouldn't wear one openly in public without something on over it," I admitted. "Not that I'd be uncomfortable doing so, but no one would give me the time of day if I did."

"Some people would," he said dryly, a smile twitching his lips, and I granted his point with a wry nod.

"I'm a little surprised that you're surprised," I said. "As I understand it, it's not uncommon to wear light armor under clothing in our line of work."

"It isn't," he said. "I just didn't realize..." He paused, then gave me a searching look. "How often do you wear it?"

"All the time," I admitted reluctantly.

"Since when?" he asked, moving closer to me.

I hesitated. I trusted Ben, and yes, I was falling in love with him. Even if those statements weren't true, I wouldn't have wanted to lie to him. "Since I got out of the hospital," I replied quietly.

He rested his hands on my shoulders and squeezed gently. "Have you talked to Dr. MacMoran about it?"

"At great length," I said with a sigh. "She says it's a sign of insecurity in the wake of being beaten up so spectacularly by Brenna. She also says it's a fairly rational response and not a bad precaution to take."

Without a word, he pulled me into his arms and hugged me close. I was just tall enough for him to rest his chin lightly on top of my head as I turned my cheek to his chest and closed my eyes.

"You're going to be fine, you know," he said softly.

"I know," I replied, and winced to hear a hint of uncertainty in my own voice. But I wondered...was I teasing him now because I was relaxing around him, or...

Several weeks earlier, I'd suffered an intense psychic attack launched by my half-sister Brenna. She had literally driven a splinter of her (twisted, warped and disturbed) psyche into my mind and done such severe damage that the mind healers at the hospital had kept me sedated for an entire week.

It had taken me most of the month since - and some intensive therapy and professional mind healing - to reach a point where I could go through a whole conversation without exploding in pointless rage or bursting into tears for no apparent reason. And, as I'd admitted to Ben, it was now rare for me to get a full night's sleep.

But not all of the nightmares were about fear and pain. The Tantric Mages I'd studied with after my eighteenth birthday had taught me to revel in and take joy from my body's responses to pleasurable stimuli.

Brenna's father...our father...had used her body against her.

Ben held me for a minute longer before quietly saying, "You know, I thought your new preference for high-necked shirts was just an affectation." He gave the low collar of my bodysuit a gentle tug. "You were covering this up."

"Yeah," I admitted. "I didn't want people to know I was wearing it all the time now."

"Summer's only a few days away, even if the weather hasn't made it obvious yet. What do you plan to do when it gets hot out? Are you going to go all summer without putting on a tee shirt?"

"Oh, there's a scoop-necked version of it too," I said with a grin, feeling my doubts and dark mood receding. I had no reason at all to doubt my feelings for Ben or that I wanted to drive him a little crazy with desire. That was all me, no question.

"Is it comfortable?" he asked curiously. "The body armor vests they give us at work are pretty bad."

"Very," I smiled. "It's very flexible, and has an all-weather enchantment on it that'll keep me cool when it's hot out, and warm when it's cold."

"Huh," he said, his expression thoughtful. "Maybe I should dress like this..."

I burst out laughing at the mental image, the last of my dark thoughts evaporating.

"Okay, okay, not really," he said, smiling down at me. "But they do make a men's version that I ought to look into. It's not a bad idea to have the extra protection on nights like tonight. I can't exactly go around wearing riot gear all the time." He sighed. "I do wish it weren't so expensive to put those all-weather enchantments on normal clothes."

"You, me, and everybody else," I replied. I lifted up on my toes and gave him a little kiss. "I should get my things together."

He released me with a nod. "We're not exactly pressed for time, but I like a leisurely dinner before going monster hunting."

I found a heavy, dark green cotton turtleneck in my bottomless bag and pulled it on over my head, then tucked it into my jeans. The bag had been a gift from my mother when I left home...it's dimensionally transcendent, so I can put pretty much anything into it up to some ludicrous cubic footage of space. It's amazingly useful.

Then I buckled on my utility belt, a recent birthday present from my mom and Jonathan which has a number of small pouches on it that were miniature versions of my bottomless bag. I checked its contents quickly, decided that I had a good generic sampling of magical components and gee-gaws, and sat down to begin the onerous task of buckling on my knee brace.

Look, I know the thing is a huge help, and that sometimes I'm just going to need it.

Especially when I'm going out at night to hunt a monster, and even more so after the warning I'd had earlier when my knee had almost given out on me. But the contraption of leather straps, metal bars and hinges is a real pain to put on.

To my surprise, Ben knelt down in front of me and took over, carefully lining it up with my knee and buckling it on over my jeans. When he finished, he looked up at me. "Too tight?"

I slowly flexed my knee, then shook my head. "No, that feels just about right." I smiled. "Thank you."

He returned my smile and rose. "You're welcome."

When he held out his hand to me, I took it and let him pull me to my feet. I tested my balance and did part of a deep knee bend, found that my knee had decided to feel relatively sturdy and not hurt, and smiled. "I guess I'm good to go."

Ben handed me my cane, then grabbed my coat and draped it over one arm, offering me the other. We went out together to find Athena and Artemis waiting for us just outside the B&B, both looking a bit disappointed.

"Didn't find anything?" Ben asked.

Athena shook her head. "Nothing, I'm afraid. We went about twenty yards into the woods and didn't see anything out of the ordinary, and it's not dense growth."

<<Strange smell was everywhere,>> Artemis added, lifting a paw to rub her nose.  
<<Stopped at street.>>

"Artemis says the smell she found earlier was everywhere," I reported, "and stopped at the street."

Ben sighed. "Well, let's go get something to eat. Then you and I," he patted my hand on his arm, "will play bait. And let's all pretend we don't remember how that worked out last time, okay?"

It was going to be a long night.

### Chapter 3

There was a distinct chill in the air when we left the cozy little Oak & Ivy pub just past ten that evening, and a faint mist hung in the air.

“There’ll be fog later,” Ben observed quietly as we walked down the road toward the park.

“Probably,” I said, my cane clicking softly with every other step. “At least the rain looks like it’s holding off. By the account we got earlier, this thing’ll be hard enough to spot in the dark, let alone if we add fog. Rain would just make it worse.”

“Assuming it comes out at all,” Athena added glumly from behind us. She was still feeling down about not having found anything during her search earlier.

“I’m sure we’ll see it,” Ben assured her. “It’ll be a good night for it to hunt.”

Ranging out ahead of us - as always - Artemis paused to look back at us. <<Pack is going hunting together! Cheer up!>> She huffed, annoyed by our somber mood.

I chuckled softly.

“What’d she say?” Ben asked, already smiling.

“She said we should cheer up,” I reported, looking forward to his reaction to the next part. “Apparently, we should be pleased because the pack is going hunting together.”

Ben glanced over his shoulder at Athena, who smiled and shrugged, then he met my eyes. “Am I part of the pack, then?”

He sounded so very earnest and hopeful. I’d expected a teasing or joking response. This lightly worded but very serious question what I felt was a rather silly statement caught me off guard.

“I guess you are,” I replied after a moment, then smiled at him. “I suppose you’ve earned a place in it...” I added in a teasing drawl, trying to lighten the mood further.

Ben flashed me the quick, boyish grin that always made something in my belly flutter pleasantly. “Good,” he nodded.

“Although,” I went on, “leopards technically don’t have packs or prides...normal ones, at least. They’re solitary animals, for the most part. Of course, my sisters are a different story.”

“Also,” Athena added, “A group of leopards is usually called a ‘leap’.”

Artemis put a paw over her eyes in a perfectly comical expression of dismay.

Ben and I both winced.

Athena shrugged whimsically. “Hey, I didn’t decide on it. I just saw it in a list.”

<<Hate stupid clever collective nouns,>> Artemis said, lowering her paw and glaring at Athena.

I repeated her comment to Ben, and he laughed. “I think we can all agree that ‘pack’ is a better term,” he said.

Artemis gave him a pointed look. <<Just remember that Alys-sister is Alpha.>> Then she turned and started trotting ahead of us again.

Athena choked out a laugh and hid it behind her hand.

“What did she say?” Ben asked, smiling.

I shook my head, trying not to laugh myself. “I’m not repeating that one.”

“Oh, come on!” Ben cajoled. “You can’t leave me hanging like that.” He took my left hand and we started walking again.”

“Oh yes I can,” I retorted. “Some things don’t need to be repeated.”

Behind us, Athena couldn’t stop giggling.

“Why do I have the feeling I was just put in my place?” Ben asked in mock despair.

Our teasing mood lasted right up until we reached the edge of the park, then quickly sobered.

“Okay,” Ben said, “I’ll be the first to admit it. This park is kind of creepy at night.”

The wide grassy swath, dotted here and there with benches, the swing set, a jungle gym and a gazebo, had looked beautiful, friendly and inviting even on a gray and rainy day. At night, with the mist already turning into a light fog that was muffling sound and the two small lights - one by the swings and another inside the gazebo - it had a distinctly sinister quality to it.

Which could, I reflected, also have been a psychic side-effect created by the presence of the creature we were there to find.

“How do you want to do this?” I asked Ben.

“Athena and Artemis should go to the gazebo, like we discussed,” he replied. “It has that low wall around it...they should be out of sight there, but still close by and able to tell what’s going on.

Athena nodded. “Between our natural senses and our bond with Alys, we should be OK.”

“And you and I,” Ben said to me, squeezing my hand, “Will go sit on the swings and be bait.”

“Couldn’t we find a different way to put it?” I asked quietly, vividly remembering the last time Ben and I had played bait to lure something out. The ghost of the Thames Slasher had been at least partly under Brenna’s control at the time, and she’d caused it to attack Ben so brutally that it had dislocated his shoulder, broken his nose and cracked a couple of his ribs before I’d been able to stop it.

“Relax, love, this is nothing like that,” Ben assured me.

“Yeah,” Athena said, a little grimly. “For one thing, I’m not letting my guard down this time.”

Even though there’s been nothing she could do against the Slasher’s ghost, Athena still felt a little guilty about not having warned us faster when she’d begun to suspect our minds had disappeared.

“Athena - “ I began.

She shook her head and started away towards the pavilion. “Come on, Artemis!”

Artemis paused and looked back and forth between us for a moment, gave what was distinctly a shrug of her shoulders, and followed her sister into the darkened park.

<<Athena,>> I sent after her, <<It wasn’t your fault any more than it was mine.>>

<<But you still feel guilty about it too,>> she shot back. Then, apologetically, she added, <<Sorry, sister. It’s irrational and I know it.>>

I smiled, a little relieved. <<Dr. MacMoran says the first step to overcoming an irrational response is to admit it.>>

Her only reply was a mental snort and a burst of amusement, but I could sense that her equilibrium had returned. I wasn’t the only one who’d walked away from the events of April with lingering scars. But Athena’s were healing, just like mine were.

“Everything okay?” Ben asked, squeezing my hand to draw my attention.

I nodded and squeezed back. “It will be, eventually.”

He gave me a long, searching look, then nodded his understanding. And he would understand, too. He'd stood steadfastly by us through the therapy, the violent mood swings and bouts of depression, doing everything in his power to keep our spirits up. I had reason to believe he'd dealt with his own traumas in the past, and understood first hand the emotional and psychological land mines Athena and I frequently stepped on.

At least, it certainly seemed that way. Either that or he was literally reading our minds.

I looked up at him as we walked towards the swings. "Ben..."

"Hmm?" He looked down at me in return, then stopped walking when he saw the serious look on my face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," I replied. "I just...I don't think I've thanked you for everything you've done for Athena, Artemis and me over the last month."

He looked surprised, then smiled. "You don't have to. I'm suitably rewarded every time one of you smiles at me."

"That is probably the sappiest thing I've ever heard you say," I replied with a little laugh. Then I lifted up on my toes and gave him a quick kiss. "Thank you anyway."

"You're welcome anyway," he replied, hugging me for a moment. Then he led me the rest of the way to the swings with an arm around my shoulders. "Here, have a seat and I'll give you a push."

"You're joking!" I laughed.

"I'll bet you've never had someone push you on a swing," Ben said teasingly.

I thought back and was a little surprised to discover that he was probably right. I'd never really had any friends my own age growing up; when you're the golden-haired, golden-eyed and pointy-eared half-Sidhe daughter of an unmarried mother in a very traditional Druidic community, the word 'outsider' gets used. A lot. And children can be more vicious than most adults are willing to admit.

My mom might've pushed me on a swing when I was very little, but if she had I couldn't remember it.

Ben grinned. "See? Sit down, love."

I frowned at him. "Are you reading my mind?"

"Your expressions," he said. "You have an eloquent face." He gently pushed me into one of the swings, took my cane and stuck it in the soft ground where I'd be able to reach it easily, then moved around behind me. "Hold onto the chains, now..."

I shook my head, laughed in spite of myself, and did as he said. A few moments later he had me swinging gently, giving me little pushes each time I swung back towards him.

<<See?>> Athena said telepathically from the pavilion. <<Just like a couple of lovesick teenagers. And you didn't even have to try. But it's good to hear you laughing so much again.>>

<<He makes me happy,>> I replied, and my thoughts were probably glowing with it.

I could almost hear my familiars purring contentedly from there. <<We know, sister.>>

"What're they saying?" Ben asked from behind me.

I tipped my head back a little. "How could you tell they were talking to me?"

"You went still, like you were listening to something," he replied. "I made an educated guess. It's easier when I can see your face...you get this far away sort of look on your face, like you're listening to something nobody else can hear." He slowed my swinging

and caught me, wrapping his arms around me from behind. "Which is true, actually. It took me a while to realize what I was seeing, but now I can usually tell."

I tipped my head back against his chest and looked up at him. "That's really sweet."

He smiled down at me. "I'm a sweet kind of guy." Then he bent and gave me an upside-down kiss.

<<Lovesick teenagers,>> Athena repeated, her amusement rippling across to me.

<<Sappy people-drivel,>> Artemis grumped, but her emotions - warm and affectionate - undercut her grouchy comment. <<Sister can play with mate, but pay attention too.>>

"Athena says we're behaving like lovesick teenagers," I reported to Ben once he straightened from our kiss. "Artemis reminds us that we're supposed to be paying attention to our surroundings."

"They're both right," he admitted, a little sheepishly. He moved around and sat down on the swing beside mine, facing in the other direction as he looped his arms lightly around the chains. "It won't be nearly as much fun this way, though."

I smiled a little. "We're not here to have fun though, are we?"

Ben sighed. "You're right. Being around you makes me want to make you happy..." He said the last part very softly, and I wondered if he hadn't meant me to hear. Or maybe even hadn't meant to say it out loud at all.

My smile grew, and I stretched out my left foot to nudge his leg. "You can make me happy tomorrow. Tonight, we keep each other safe and stop a monster."

Even in the dim light of the lamp above us, I could tell he was blushing. "Right. Safe tonight, happy tomorrow. Got it."

Over the next two hours, we settled into a rhythm. One of us would be up and walking around the swings, while the other would be sitting and watching. If we were both sitting at the same time, we faced in opposite directions to make sure nothing could sneak up on us.

When I began studying investigation techniques for my Wizard qualification exams, one of the things Hollis Ellister - my employer and current teacher - had explained to me was how much harder a quiet investigation could be than an active one. In an active investigation, you chase, pursue, fight, and are pretty much constantly doing something. It's exhausting. It can push you to both your physical and mental limits, and sometimes beyond them.

During the week I'd spent helping to clear the spirits out of the old asylum that had been my very first job for Hollis, I'd been getting little more than three or four hours of sleep a night. There was just too much to do for me to get more rest than that.

I'd slept almost constantly for three days when it was done.

The other type of investigation is actually more trying, in my opinion. Every spellcaster learns to be studious, pouring over tomes and records for endless hours without breaking concentration, lest you miss a vitally important passage that could affect the outcome of casting a spell. But nothing at all can prepare you for a stake-out.

Hours of doing nothing, waiting for something to happen.

During an investigation at a client's home, Athena, Artemis and I had spent a long night waiting and watching for something to assault the wards I'd put up. Athena and Artemis had resorted to playing little tricks on one another to stay awake, and I was actually on the verge of dozing off standing up and staring out a window when something had finally happened.

For my money, watching and waiting with nothing else to do is much harder than any

physical chase. And I hadn't slept well in weeks. So I was embarrassed but not terribly surprised when Athena's whispered <<Alys, something's coming,>> startled me out of a light doze.

<<Thank you, Athena,>> I replied, rubbing my eyes and feeling entirely too sheepish. <<From where?>>

<<From the woods. Roughly eleven o'clock from your current facing.>>

I reached out to touch Ben's shoulder and found him turning towards me already. Oh, how I hoped he hadn't noticed me dozing off. "How...?" I started to ask.

He gave me a little smile. "I heard the gasp when you woke up. Athena give you a mental nudge?"

I sighed. Busted. "Yes," I said quietly. "Incoming, eleven o'clock from my facing."

Ben rose and stretched casually, turning to look in that direction.

"You know," Ben whispered, "it might have approached from your direction because it saw you dozing off."

"That doesn't make me feel a whole lot better about it. You should've woken me up," I replied, more sharply than I'd intended. I winced. This was no time for me to lose control of my emotions. "Sorry."

"No problem," he said lightly, already used to my occasional lapses. "I don't see anything, do you?"

I peered into the darkness. Between the deep, cloudy night and the low ground fog, I couldn't see much of anything more than a few feet beyond the circle of light cast by the lamp above us. Not for the first time, I was a little jealous of my familiars' superior night vision.

"No," I said. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Five minutes past two," Ben whispered.

"It's pretty consistent, anyway," I murmured. <<Athena, Artemis, can you see it from where you are?>>

<<Fog disturbed in a line towards you,>> Artemis replied. <<Breeze brought us a strange smell. Wrong. Like before, but fresh and getting stronger.>>

Feline and canine familiars are usually extremely good at sensing the supernatural. It's a like a sixth (or maybe seventh or eighth) sense for them, and often manifests as things smelling 'wrong' to them. If a feline or canine familiar tells you that someone or something doesn't smell right, pay attention.

<<We can also hear a weird sound from here,>> Athena added. <<Kind of a shuffling, sliding, slapping sound. Could be that thing moving.>>

"I don't see what else it could be," I muttered.

"Pardon?" Ben asked.

"The girls smell and hear it, but they can't see anything other than the fog moving a little in a line towards us," I reported.

"Ah." Ben moved around behind me, resting his hands on my shoulders and rubbing gently. "Damnable fog," he muttered. "Hey, I don't suppose you could quickly whip up a bit of wind to blow the fog away."

"Easily," I said with a nod. "And if the thing is at all sensitive to magic, it'll immediately know that we're not a couple of tender young teenagers for it to gnaw on."

"Good point."

"I have those once in a while," I said with a small smile.

“True,” he agreed. Then I felt his left hand leave my shoulder. “What do you sense?” I lifted my left hand as well, spread my fingers, and concentrated.

Slowly, I began to see the flow of Anima around me. Living things - and even some dead and inanimate things - have their own auras, mostly faint blues and golds that represented health and growing things.

Athena and Artemis, for example, were glowing blobs of greenish-gold energy. Another green blob wheeled overhead...probably a nocturnal bird or a bat. The woods seemed faintly luminous in eerie shades of blue and green.

As a generality, and like most elements of Hermetic magic, the colors that make up auras are largely subjective. I saw blues, golds and greens as healthy colors. Silver and white as indicative of intense magic, and darker, murkier colors as representative of darker things. Other people saw them differently, and each Hermetic spellcaster had to draw their own conclusions as to what they meant. Quite often, a teacher would train a student to see auras the same way they did; my personal image of the way auras looked was nearly identical to Jonathan Tremane’s for example.

Everyone agreed on two points, though: First, shades of red tended to indicate violent emotions and magic; second, that black represented the very darkest of magics and most evil of emotions. A black aura never, ever indicated anything good.

A blob of black energy was slowly crawling along the ground towards us, a trail of blackish residue leading back to the woods. I shivered a little.

“Something’s coming,” I whispered, “and it’s not nice.”

“Agreed,” Ben said quietly. He’d probably been doing the same thing. “Get ready.”

I reached out and took hold of my cane as I released my aura-sight spell, my eyes trying in vain to see whatever was coming towards us. As useful as viewing auras is, it’s essentially just viewing energy...and I was probably about to start calling up and throwing Anima around. Energy is energy.

<<See it!>> Artemis reported suddenly, sounding excited. <<It’s starting to circle.>>

<<Which way?>> I asked.

<<Right,>> Artemis replied immediately.

I sighed. I loved Artemis dearly for her simplistic view of the world and startlingly insightful (and often very funny) comments. But sometimes it worked against me.

<<To your left,>> Athena added, amused. <<Counter-clockwise.>>

<<Thank you.>> “The girls say it’s starting to circle us, counter-clockwise.”

Ben grunted. “I’ll take their word for it. I can’t see a damned thing out there.”

“Interesting choice of words,” I joked weakly. “What if that’s what it is.”

“Then I’ll be highly amused.”

From the darkness beyond the edge of the lamp’s circle of light, off to our left a bit, something growled quietly. Or at least made a noise that my mind registered as a growl.

“Enough of this,” Ben murmured. “It knows we’re here, it’s come out, and it’s stalking us. Light it up.”

I nodded. “Cover your eyes. Then I thrust my cane into the air.

My cane. Knowing that I was going to be stuck with one for a while during my recovery, Jonathan and my mom had gone to the trouble of having a special one made for me. Its shaft was dark ironwood, as hard as steel and well able to take enchantments. Its head was stainless steel molded in the shape of a running snow leopard, and with a clever locking mechanism the cane concealed a slender smallsword.

I had plans to make the cane a magical tool of greater flexibility and utility than my old wizard's staff (which Brenna had shattered during our fight). So far, I'd just had enough time to engrave on it the runes for collecting and channeling Anima more efficiently - getting more 'bang for your buck', as the saying goes.

But that was enough for my purposes tonight. I shaped a light spell in my mind, and wordlessly channeled Anima through the staff and released it.

I used to do my spellcasting in broken Gaelic. But honestly, it's kind of a handful and while the language is poetically beautiful, it's a hair's breadth to imprecise for really focused spellcasting. It had failed me when I'd tried to wrench Ben away from the Thames Slasher's ghost (the meaning of the phrase I'd chosen had been so vague that my intentions were muddled and the spell hadn't gone off quite as intended), and it had slowed me down painfully during my fight with Brenna. So over the past month, I'd fallen back on Jonathan and Hollis's preferred medium for verbal Foci. Broken Latin.

The results are better and faster, if not quite as pretty to hear. For a simple light spell, however, I'd cast it so many times that I didn't need the extra focus.

The head of my cane suddenly radiated brilliant light, turning night to day. Then the light lifted off the top of my cane and floated up another ten feet, expanding the sun-bright illumination wider and wider.

I rose, taking a step forward away from Ben and quickly swung my cane in a circle around my head as I channeled more Anima through it. This spell I hadn't used as often, so I took the extra precaution of packing it in a verbal Focus, calling out "*Afflo!*"

The result was precisely what I'd wanted. Wind rushed out from my cane in a circular motion, sweeping up the fog and blowing it out away from us.

With the fog cleared and the brilliant ball of almost-sunlight giving us a clear view of everything around us, we got a good look at the creature.

I immediately wished I hadn't.

Its skin was an oily, glossy-looking black and perfectly smooth. Its head, roughly humanoid, was bald and had no visible ears or face...then I realized that the face was currently pressed into the ground. It wasn't on its back, it was on its chest - what I guessed was its chest anyway.

I'd been momentarily confused by the one detail Tim and Liz had remembered clearly. Its legs were, as they'd indicated, distinctly backwards from a human's. Completely so, in fact. The knees bent in reverse so that with its legs pulled in, they were pointed to the sky, and its feet - which I couldn't get a clear look at yet - were definitely attached relative to the knees rather than the rest of the body.

If it could walk upright, you'd have to track it in reverse.

It had arms, but they hung limply at its sides at the moment, tucked in close with fingers splayed loosely. The claws...god, the claws. They gleamed brightly at the ends of its fingers and toes, wickedly curved and long enough that a good three inches were visible even though they were dug into the soft earth.

Then it lifted its head, and I actually took a step back in a mixture of surprise and primal, instinctive horror.

Human beings are hard-wired to expect faces. Even the most hideous face of the most demonic creature provides familiar features and can - with practice - be read for recognizable emotions. It's not uncommon for children to have nightmares about creatures with no faces...and it's a terrifying thing, looking at something that you feel should have a face but

doesn't. There's no way to judge emotions or state of mind. Or even make some kind of connection.

This creature had no eyes - not even any eye sockets. It had no nose or nostrils. The face where its face should have been was a completely blank space, as smooth and oily and black as the rest of its skin.

Except for a mouth.

Its mouth was a vicious slash where a mouth would normally appear on a face, but was too wide and filled with a double row of shark-like teeth. It grinned constantly, but it wasn't a friendly grin. It was the sort of grin that promises a painful, violent death.

All of my concentration focused on this strange creature, even as my body shivered with instinctive fear. I couldn't discern its motives, and tried very hard not to assume that it was hostile based on that mouth. Would it be possible to communicate with it? Maybe figure out what it wanted, and if it wasn't violent get it to go away?

As I stared at it, features began to form above its mouth. I was surprised, but looked more closely. Maybe this was a sign that it wanted to communicate with us. I watched in fascination as a nose formed, and eyes. Cheekbones, and a delicate jawline. It never grew hair or eyebrows...but when the golden-hued eyes opened, it was impossible not to recognize my own face.

My own features poised above that wide, vicious slash of a mouth.

Was this its way of communicating? Was it trying to tell me something? I thought I heard Ben saying something, but it wasn't nearly as important as maintaining eye contact with this creature - now that it had eyes - so that I could figure it out.

I felt dizzy. All the strength seemed to rush out of my body at once. I felt my right knee buckle, and the world seemed to be tipping oddly.

Was I falling?

## Chapter 4

Ben caught me before I could hit the ground, the jolt of abruptly-halted motion breaking me out of the trance the creature had put me in. At the same time, Artemis landed on the creature's back with a roar, flattening its legs and digging her teeth into its spine.

Athena arrived a moment later, her shieldblade whistling through the air in a sweeping arc. The creature's head tumbled away from the rest of its body, its face instantly returning to its original blank state.

"Alys?" Ben asked urgently. "Are you all right?" He sank to his knees on the damp grass, cradling me across his lap in his arms.

I blinked up at him, still feeling dazed and a bit dizzy. "What?"

Athena jammed the tip of her sword into the ground and knelt down beside us. "Alys?" she asked, eyes wide and a little scared. When I just blinked at her in confusion, she looked up at Ben instead. "What happened? She felt really far away for a minute there."

Artemis sat down beside her, giving me a worried look. <<Alys-sister okay?>>

I shook my head to clear the cobwebs from it and looked around at them.

"What...what just happened?" I was shocked by how shaky and weak I felt.

"You tell me," Ben shook his head. "One second the thing was snarling at us, the next second it smiled that creepy smile and then it was wearing your face. You started to fall, so I caught you and the girls dealt with the creature."

"Some sort of psychic attack?" Athena reached out and cupped my cheek in her hand. <<You felt like you were a million miles away. I could barely hear your thoughts.>>

"That's what it sounds like," I agreed, reaching up to cover her hand with mine. "I think it was draining energy from me, too. I feel like I've run a marathon." I gave her a weak smile. "Looks like I'd better talk to Dr. MacMoran again. My psychic defenses must still need work. I had no idea they were so..." I trailed off, trying to find the right word.

"Nonexistent?" Ben asked dryly.

"That'll work." I released Athena's hand and rubbed my forehead. "I guess it was hostile."

Athena brushed my hair away from my eyes.

"Guess so," Ben agreed. Then he shifted, slipping one arm beneath my knees and the other behind my back. "Up we go," he said, standing up with me held in his arms.

"Hey!" I protested weakly.

Athena grabbed her sword and sheathed it as she rose, then scooped up my fallen cane.

"We'll have the local police pick up the corpse and ship it off to Yard forensics," Ben said. "I'll call them from our rooms. Athena, would you and Artemis mind staying here until they arrive? Just in case."

"Not at all," Athena said firmly, passing me my cane. "I'm sure you'll take good care of our sister."

"Count on it," Ben said just as firmly. "Thank you. I'll make a couple of calls, then get Alys tucked into bed."

<<Artemis and Athena-sister will make sure nobody touches monster;>> Artemis said.

"Don't I get a say in this?" I protested, still sounding weak even to myself.

“Nope,” Ben replied jauntily.

“No,” Athena said at the same time, but more firmly, her unnerved concern coming across to me clearly.

<<Alys-sister should let her mate take care of her,>> Artemis added teasingly, somewhat less rattled by the situation.

I sighed, knowing when it was time to surrender to the inevitable. Besides, I didn’t think I had the strength to stand on my own just then anyway.

It was about a fifteen minute walk back to the little bed and breakfast, but Ben insisted on carrying me the entire way. By the time we were halfway there, I was sagging with exhaustion and had to admit that I might not have been able to walk it by myself anyway. I was half-asleep in his arms with my head on his shoulder (quite a nice place to be, incidentally) by the time he set me down on my bed.

I heard him lean my cane against the bedside table, and his soft voice as he spoke to the local police department on the phone. Some indeterminate amount of time later, I felt him unlacing and removing my hiking boots.

Then the side of the bed sank down and gentle fingers caressed my cheek. I opened my eyes and he smiled down at me.

“Hi,” he said quietly. “If you sit up, I’ll help you out of that coat.”

I sat up slowly, feeling a bit creaky. “Well,” I said, trying to sound light-hearted, “that was a fairly pathetic showing.” I winced when I realized it had come out sounding more bitter than I’d intended.

“Hey, now,” he slid my coat away and draped it over a nearby chair before returning his attention to me. “You’re recovering from some pretty bad injuries, and the doctor said you might stumble across unexpected weaknesses. I probably shouldn’t have called you in on this one, but I know you’ve been antsy to get back to work...” He trailed off, then smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. Have you tested your mental defenses before now?”

“Dr. MacMoran did,” I admitted. She had, in fact, been rather adamant about my needing to start building them back up. I couldn’t imagine why I’d ignored the advice.

He gently brushed my hair away from my face and tucked it behind my ear, idly tracing the pointed tip of my ear as he did so. It was an affectionate gesture, and the sensation sent a pleasant little shiver down my spine and made me smile and lean towards him a little.

“Well,” he said finally, “It’s something to work on. I’ll let you get some rest and head back.”

I caught his hand as he started to rise. “Stay,” I whispered. “Just for a few minutes?”

I drew him back down - and mind you, I was still tired and pretty much half asleep, so he couldn’t have been resisting at all - and turned my face up to his for a kiss. He obliged, making me tingle all the way down to my toes. I started to lay back, pulling him with me...

...And was, of course, interrupted.

<<Alys!>> Athena’s alarmed voice rang clear in my mind, sending adrenaline rushing through me and jolting me back to full wakefulness.

<<Creepy thing moving!>> Artemis added almost instantly, sounding just as alarmed.

“Bugger,” I muttered against Ben’s lips.

Ben leaned back a little and gave me a surprised - and slightly hurt - look, which quickly grew serious when he saw my expression. “What is it?”

I held up a finger to let him know I needed a moment. <<What’s happening, sisters?

>>

<<Creepy thing *moving!*>> Artemis repeated, obviously a bit annoyed that she had to do so.

<<When your magelight finally went out, its head melted and started flowing towards the body,>> Athena clarified. <<It's pulling itself back together.>>

"It's not dead yet," I told Ben. "Athena says its head is reconnecting with its body."

His forehead thumped very gently against mine. "That's just not fair."

"It rarely is," I agreed, giving him a little kiss. "Come on, let's go." I gently pushed him back and looked around. "Where'd you put my boots?"

"You should really stay here," he said weakly, bending to pick them up and hand them to me before rising.

I took my boots from him, kept hold of his hand and kissed his palm. "Thank you, but you know I have to go."

He sighed and nodded. "I'd better call the police station again and have them hold back. The last thing we need is to trip over a bunch of enthusiastic amateurs."

"How did I become an expert?" I asked wryly as I tied my boots back on. "I haven't even taken my wizard's licensure exams yet."

"You blew everybody away with the way you handled that haunting in London last year," he retorted as he dialed the police station. "That's what you get for setting the bar so high." He winked at me.

I laughed, rose carefully, and put my coat back on before grabbing my cane. I still felt a little drained, but adrenaline does amazing things for exhaustion, and my familiars were in danger. By the time I was ready to go, so was Ben.

We went as fast as we could with my bad knee. It wasn't quite a running pace, but it was at least a fast jog. If I was out of breath and limping more heavily than usual when we got there, we still made it in less than ten minutes.

The creature had already finished reconstituting itself, and was busily trying to keep up with my familiars. Athena would dart in and deal it a crushing blow with the blunt side of her shield blade, then leap back to avoid its claws as Artemis landed hard on it, raking its back with her claws and biting into its neck. When it thrashed around to reach for her, she leaped away and Athena waded back in, slashing and thrusting her blade.

It was a tactic they'd practiced for keeping a single foe off-balance and too busy to keep up with either of them individually. But in the dim light of the lamp behind the swing set, the creature seemed to be both stronger and tougher than before. Neither Athena's blows nor Artemis's vicious attacks seemed to be having much of an effect on it.

Under bright light, Athena and Artemis had been able to seemingly kill it. As soon as the light faded, it had begun pulling itself back together.

With a quick surge of Anima, I threw a fresh Magelight into the air above the fight. It wasn't quite as bright as the first one, but from the way the creature flinched and hissed, it might've been enough.

And to some extent, it was. The blows that my sisters were landing began leaving visible wounds, rather than healing instantly. That was something, at least.

"Clear away," Ben shouted, aiming his Magearm pistol at the creature.

As Athena and Artemis lunged away in opposite directions, he pulled the trigger. I felt the surge of Anima from him as the hammer struck the runeblock with a snap, and a bolt of lightning burst from the pistol's barrel and struck the creature squarely in the side.

It didn't so much as flinch, just turned to look right at Ben, its huge, shark-like grin

seeming to grow broader.

Ben shot it again, the lightning striking it squarely in the face. This time, the creature rocked back a little, but its oily-looking black skin just seemed to absorb the energy.

“Well, crap,” Ben said. With the smooth motions of long practice, he slid open a panel on the top of his pistol and exchanged the rune-engraved cylinder of metal inside with another one from his pocket. He dropped the first runeblock, slapped the chamber shut, took aim, and started pulling the trigger again.

This time, brilliant yellow-orange bolts of fire shot from the pistol. The first shot gouged a smoking furrow in the creature's left shoulder. The second shot burrowed into its chest just below its neck, leaving a scorched crater. The third shot smacked straight into the thing's mouth, blasting away teeth and cutting off the ululating howl of pain that had exploded from it after the second shot hit.

What was left of its head thudded to the ground. But in spite of the damage Ben had done, it clearly wasn't dead. It thrashed and flailed at the ground with its hands and feet, its body twisting and writhing.

And it was healing. Slowly, very slowly, but it was healing.

“Alys?” Ben asked. “Can you bring out the big guns?”

I took a deep breath and nodded. We were out in the open, and I doubted the Swindon town council would object to some scorched grass in exchange for a dead monster.

I gathered Anima, channeling it through me and into my cane. I wanted this thing to burn hot and bright, so I kept gathering Anima for a moment before finally thrusting my cane towards it, adding my anger at having been attacked by it earlier into the spell and defining its shape further with a shout of “*Incendium!*”

I was aiming for its center of mass, but at the last moment it raised its head right into line with where I was aiming. Frustrated, I pushed an extra, angry surge of Anima into my spell. Just to make sure.

A blast of fire as thick around as my arm and hot enough to be blue-white leapt from the tip of my cane and struck the creature squarely in the face. It burned a hole clean through the creature's oily black head and struck the center of its back just above its pelvis.

It didn't even have time to scream and thrash...it simply died. The resulting blaze engulfed the creature in seconds and was bright enough and hot enough to drive us all back several yards.

“We should really put that out before it spreads,” Ben said a minute later, still shielding his face against the heat

“Let it burn,” I said coldly. I saw no reason to give this thing the slightest chance at recovery. Then I saw Ben watching me with a concerned expression and went over what I had said, how I'd said it and what my current emotional state was.

Let it burn, I'd said...I'd said it with cold anger, and I still felt that coldness in my belly. That it would dare to attack me, threaten my familiars and boyfriend, innocent teenagers...

I took a deep breath and let it out, pushing the coldness and the anger aside. It wasn't me, not at all.

“Crap,” I muttered. “Now is not the time for me to be losing control. Thank you,” I said to Ben.

He simply nodded, but I could see the relief on his face. I had gone a little over the top with that fire spell, and I knew it. So I gathered fresh Anima, lifting my cane to the sky

and shaping a new spell in my mind. Then I whispered, "*Imbris...*" and released the spell into the air.

The fog, which had been burned off close to the pyre that had been the creature, suddenly swirled in and up. It gathered into a small storm cloud about a dozen feet above the blaze and, with a tiny (and, I thought, rather cute) rumble of thunder, began to rain heavily on the burning remains.

"Nice," Ben said with a grin as he bent to collect his temporarily discarded runeblock.

"Hey, if you're going to be a wizard, you have to do it with style." I smiled back at him.

Athena and Artemis reached us then, having met up and carefully skirted the fire. "That was impressive," Athena said, giving me a piercing look. <<You lost control for a moment.>>

I nodded slightly. <<Guilty as charged. Ben snapped me out of it.>>

She smiled a little. <<Artemis jokes about it, but he really would make a good mate for you, sister.>>

By the time the fire was out and my little storm cloud was dispersed, the creature had been reduced to a pile of soggy, still-smoldering ashes.

"Well," Ben said as I poked through the remains with my cane, "we'll probably never know what it was, but at least it'll never bother anybody again."

"I'll do penance by spending time at the Central Library of the Arcane trying to figure out what it was," I replied glumly, well aware that I'd messed up a bit. "We got a good look at it, got a taste of how it takes prey and what it could do. Between us, Athena and I should be able to create a clear image of it from our memories. If there's records of anything matching its description and abilities, it shouldn't be too hard to find."

Athena, standing beside me, squeezed my shoulder gently. "The important thing is that it can't hurt anyone now."

Ben nodded. "She's right. That is the most important thing."

Artemis huffed. <<Don't know why pack is upset. Hunt was good. Prey is dead. Nobody hurt.>> She rubbed up against Ben's leg until he crouched down to scratch her ears and rub her neck, making her purr happily. <<New pack member knows his place, too.>>

I snorted a laugh and Athena giggled. As always, Artemis knew how to shake us out of our dour moods.

Ben looked up and smiled. "I have a feeling a joke was just made at my expense."

"Maybe," Athena and I said together, with feigned innocence.

He chuckled softly and ruffled Artemis's ears once more before rising. "It's like hazing at the police academy all over again. Speaking of whom...let's go let the police know they can come cordon off the area now."

"I want to keep watch over this thing's remains," I said seriously. "Considering the way my artificial sunlight weakened it earlier, the real thing should take care of what's left of it come dawn."

We all looked up together, and saw stars peeking through the clouds. It would be a sunny morning, thank goodness.

"Sounds like a plan," Ben said. "I'll go let them know."

He gave me a quick kiss, then jogged off towards the street at the edge of the park where the police would, by now, be waiting. I leaned heavily on my cane, glad of the knee brace and trying to ignore the dull throbbing pain that had started during the rush to get back

to Athena and Artemis.

“Rough night,” Athena observed casually, and I sensed her desire to say something. She quickly held it back and buried it, hiding whatever it was from me.

“Hey,” I said softly, my chest aching a little. “What was that?”

“It’s nothing, Alys, really,” she said. Then sighed and added very gently, “I’m just worried about you.”

I turned towards her fully. “Athena, sister, you never have to hide anything from me. What’s worrying you?”

She blinked rapidly and wiped away tears, startling me. “You’ve been pushing so hard to get better, and getting so little sleep...and tonight you lost control of your magic. I know you didn’t mean for that spell to be so intense.”

“Athena,” I said softly, taking two steps to her and folding her into my arms. I had to rest some of my weight against her, but she took it without protest and held me tightly, burying her face against my neck. I sighed softly. “The last few weeks have been very hard on you, haven’t they.”

“I didn’t want you to notice,” Athena whispered against my neck, sniffing a little. “You already had so much to deal with...”

“Oh, Athena,” I hugged her tighter and rested my head against hers. I looked down and saw Artemis sitting at our feet, watching us with concern etched into her feline features. <<You never let on either, did you.>>

Artemis shook her head. <<Athena-sister said it was important that Alys-sister get our unconditional support, no matter what. So Artemis and Athena-sister were strong for you when you couldn’t be.>>

I held Athena close, staring down at Artemis in surprise. How had I not noticed this going on? It would have been bad enough if they’d been friends or actual siblings...but it was worse, because they were my familiars, animals bound to me through magic as extensions of my mind, heart and soul. They were as much a part of me as my right hand...and I had, metaphorically speaking, been hurting that hand without noticing. Had I been using them as emotional crutches, much as I used my cane?

<<I’m sorry,>> I whispered to them, reaching down with one hand to caress Artemis as she rose up and planted her forepaws against me and Athena for balance. <<I’m so sorry...>>

<<We love you, Alys-sister,>> Artemis said firmly. <<No sorry needed. Did what we could to help you.>>

<<She’s right,>> Athena said. <<We were able to shore you up when you needed us to, so we did, because we love you.>>

<<I love you both so much,>> I replied, feeling the tears slipping down my cheeks and knowing that the pain behind them was really, genuinely mine for the first time in a month. <<I didn’t mean to hurt you.>>

<<You didn’t,>> Athena assured me, relaxing a little. <<Just scared us a little. And now we can relax our vigil a bit.>>

<<Alys-sister has exhausted her sisters,>> Artemis added, nuzzling my shoulder before dropping back to all fours. <<We deserve special treats and petting!>>

Athena and I both laughed teary laughs, but I agreed silently. I’d find some way to do something special for them. Until then, I kept them close to me, telling them over and over how much I loved them, and promising that I’d talk to Dr. MacMoran about my control

issues again.

That was how Ben found us five minutes later as the Swindon police moved in to cordon off the area. He raised an eyebrow and glanced around. "Um...if you three want to go back to the B&B, I can cover things here until dawn."

Artemis padded over to rub against his leg, then trotted off towards the woods.

<<Artemis will try to scent if there are more creatures.>>

Ben looked bemused. "Off to check the perimeter?"

"Something like that," I said, my smile starting to return.

Athena gently detached from me, wiping her eyes. "Sorry. We had a bit of a breakthrough."

"So I see," Ben replied, smiling gently at us. "Everything going to be okay?"

Athena nodded. "Everything will be fine. I'd better keep half an eye on Artemis...if she runs into something out there, she might try to take it on by herself."

To Ben's surprise, she stopped to give him a tight hug before jogging off after her sister.

I watched them go, then sighed and leaned heavily on my cane. "I can't believe I did that to them."

Ben stared at me blankly. "Huh?"

I shook my head a little. "I don't think I'm quite as healed as I've been pretending," I said quietly. "I think I've been using them as...as emotional crutches, I guess."

"Ah," Ben said uncertainly. "Huh?"

I smiled a little. "Like my cane, only leaning on their stability and emotions to maintain my own."

Ben winced appreciatively. "Oh. Ouch."

I nodded. "I want to do something special for them, by way of apology." I sighed. "I just have no idea what."

"You'll think of something. In the meantime, the important thing is that you've taken a big step towards healing." He looked down at me, concerned. "Promise me you'll talk to Dr. MacMoran about this."

"I promise," I said, then moved closer to him and wrapped my left arm around his waist. "You've been very patient with me."

"I think you're worth it," he said, draping his arm lightly across my shoulders.

"Anyway, the local police are going to cordon off the park until we give them the all-clear. Do you think there was more than one of those things?"

"We don't even know what it was," I said ruefully, "but I sincerely hope not. One was plenty. Maybe I'll lay some enchantments onto Athena's shieldblade. I was thinking about doing it before I was injured."

"Add some protective charms to Artemis's collar?" Ben suggested.

I nodded. "Also a good idea."

"Thanks. You could give Artemis a year's supply of catnip," he said, his tone gently teasing.

"Athena might get into it by accident." My lips almost twitched into a smile at the memory. "She tried to give Artemis a catnip toy a few months ago. I found her sprawled on the sofa, giggling and flushed. It was kind of adorable, but she was useless for hours."

Ben chuckled appreciatively. "I'd've liked to have seen that."

"She was terribly embarrassed about it afterwards. She hadn't expected it to have an

effect on her.”

“I’m a little surprised it did myself,” he admitted. “Still, it’d make one heck of a practical joke.”

“Yes it would,” I agreed.

“Do you want some of the creature’s remains sent to Hollis or Jonathan?” Ben asked, steering the subject back to our work.

“Both, I think. It’s more Jonathan’s field than Hollis’s, but I’d like to run some experiments myself. If you can swing it.”

“I’m pretty sure I can. After we’re sure the thing’s really dead, that is. Do you think that thing was really feeding on you somehow?”

With the adrenaline dying down and the emotionally charged aftermath fading, I was starting to feel drained again. “Pretty sure, yeah,” I said with a nod. “I’m exhausted. More than I should be.”

He squeezed me gently. I snuggled close to his side and rested my head against his shoulder. Athena and Artemis rejoined us about a half an hour later, and together we stood and silently watched the sun rise.

Then the first rays of sunlight touched the creature’s remains, a few wisps of dark smoke rose up from the ashes, but that was all.

“Well,” Ben said with obvious relief, “that’s done. I’ll get everything packed up and shipped off to the appropriate people.”

“I guess Athena, Artemis and I will head for the Central Library to see if we can figure out what that thing was,” I said wearily.

“What we’re going to do,” Athena said firmly, “is go to the B&B and get some sleep. At least eight hours worth. The Central Library will still be there tomorrow.”

I was about to protest when Ben bent and whispered in my ear, “Want me to join you later?”

I couldn’t help the smile that spread across my face.

“Yes.” Cuddling with Ben and Athena...getting some more real, restful sleep...was too alluring to resist. The Library could wait.

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