

The Kinnear Chronicles: A Very Merry Yule

by Joshua Sanofsky

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Author's Note

This bit of mostly light-hearted fluff (with a few plot-advancing goodies hidden within) takes place - for those keeping track - during the last few weeks of Alys's 1986. It was going to make up the last section of the second book, which was going to be called *Seasons of Healing*. This section would have been 'Winter' (obviously) and was meant to mark the beginning of the end of Alys's recovery period and her return to something resembling normal.

Unfortunately, everything that was supposed to fill the gap between 'Spring' (published as the short story *The Thing in the Park*) and 'Winter' failed to come into focus in any meaningful way, in spite of quite a lot of effort on my part and that of my editors. I suspect Alys simply didn't want those very difficult and painful (and embarrassing) months to become public knowledge. Take them as having happened, and Alys will no doubt allow the details to become known in her own good time.

Meanwhile, you can enjoy *A Very Merry Yule* with the extended Kinnear clan. Hopefully as much as I did.

Chapter 1

Yule has always been one of my favorite times of the year. Aside from the fact that I've always loved winter (really, I love all of the seasons in their own ways...but autumn and winter are my favorites), Yule has always represented to me the very best that humanity has to offer.

When I was a little girl, it was pretty much the only time of the year when everyone in town was nice to me. Adults laid no ridicule on me, and the town kids let me join in the snowball fights and help make snowmen. Maybe it was easier to forget how odd I was with a thick woolen hat covering my pale golden hair and pointed ears. Maybe they just felt that nobody should be left out of the celebration. I'd like to think it was the latter...but realistically, I know the former is more likely.

During the ten years I was apprenticed to Jonathan Tremane in Dublin, Yule was pretty much the only time I got to see my mother for any significant length of time. For the first couple of years, Jonathan sent me home alone for the twelve day holiday, saying it was important for me to keep my connection to my roots and with my mother without his interference. Later, after I turned sixteen, he finally gave in to my mother's annual invitation to join us...the first year, only for two days at the end of the holiday for the big Yule feast.

The second year, having discovered how amazing my mother's cooking is, he stayed for four days. Then six days the third year, and by the time I was reviewing for my Mage exams he was staying for pretty much the whole holiday. I didn't realize it then, but he was already subtly courting my mother. Mom thinks it's cute that I never noticed.

Yule has always been a special time of year for me.

So much had happened since last Yule that I was rather relieved when the joint Sending arrived from Jonathan and my mom.

Late one evening in the first week of December, a spectral snowy owl - which looked very much like my mother's familiar Apollo - swooped into the room I shared with Athena and Artemis and changed into a translucent image of my mom and new step-father standing side by side. My mother looked happy. Jonathan looked almost comically nervous. I knew from a conversation with him earlier in the year that he wasn't entirely comfortable with the 'family' thing yet.

"We've just finished moving into our new place in Swindon," mom began, "And wanted to invite you to join us for Yule."

"We're not really done unpacking," Jonathan interrupted, running his fingers through his hair, "And we know you were in Swindon just a few months ago - Ben spotted the house for us, after all - but this is your home too, and we'd love to have you here for the holiday..."

My mom elbowed him gently before he could really get to babbling. "That includes your sisters, of course," she said smoothly, "And you should extend an invitation to Hollis and Elsie if they want to get away from the city for a couple of days."

"The house is big enough," Jonathan explained.

"And do invite Ben," My mother continued as if he hadn't said anything. "We haven't seen either of you since you returned to London, and we'd hate for anyone close to you to be stuck in that dreary city during Yule."

The city was hardly dreary, and was especially festive during Yule...but mom had never liked cities. That was probably why they'd compromised by settling in Swindon. There was a small Druidic community nearby in Avebury that mom could open up relations with, and Swindon itself was just large enough for Jonathan to "feel like he was in civilization" (as mom jokingly put it).

As for Ben...it'd probably be a good experience for him. I'd asked him a few days before if he had any plans for Yule - the leading sort of question one asks when one's boyfriend never mentions any family - and his response had been noncommittal and uninterested. When I'd pressed gently, he'd admitted to never having had much use for the holiday, as he'd always seen it as a family holiday, and he never had any family to speak of.

That had been a revelation, and maybe helped explain why he'd worked so hard to help me piece myself back together after having known me for such a short time. When you'd never had anybody, suddenly having someone would make that person so much more meaningful. I kind of understood that, since for many years the only family I'd had was my mother. May the gods help anyone who tries to harm the people I now considered family.

So...perhaps it was time to show Ben what having a family meant. If it didn't terrify him into fleeing, he'd definitely be a keeper. (As if he weren't already.)

"Anyway," Jonathan said, "Do let us know your plans, and we'll get rooms ready for anyone who wants to come. We won't even stick Ben in the cellar."

"Decent of them," Athena said dryly from where she was lounging on the window seat.

At the same time, my mother dug her elbow into Jonathan's ribs again. "Jon! Ignore him, Alys. Try to bring Ben along. We love you honey, and we'll see you soon."

Jonathan smiled and nodded, as close as he'd actually come to admitting he loved me thus far. But that was okay. Part of his mind - a large part - still saw me as his apprentice. And I had a hard time thinking of him as anything other than my former Master. So it would have been a little weird if he did anyway.

Their translucent image faded away.

"So," Athena said, sitting up and putting her feet on the floor. "Are we going to invite Ben?"

"Are you kidding?" I asked with a smile, getting up from my desk and stretching. "Absolutely we're asking him. If I have to tie him up and sling him over my shoulder to get him to go, I will."

Ben is about six inches taller and about three stone heavier than I am, and it's all muscle. The mental image of me carrying him - bad knee notwithstanding - must have been too much for

Athena. She almost collapsed laughing, her amusement suffusing me. I grinned at her.

Artemis, sprawled on her back on the bed with her fore paws curled under her chin and her hind paws splayed without any thought for dignity (when a cat - any cat - relaxes, they *really* relax), sighed gustily. <<Alys-sister won't need to resort to force. Ben will crumble if you pout at him.>>

"True enough," Athena said between giggles, wiping her eyes.

I smiled. "I'm going to go ask Hollis if he and Elsie would like to join us."

"Do you think they will?" Athena asked.

I grabbed my cane and headed for the door. My limp wasn't as bad as it had been, but improvement was slow, and having had plenty of warnings I now preferred not to risk it even indoors. "Probably not," I admitted, "But I'd like to make the offer anyway."

Hollis smiled at the offer and politely declined. "Elsie and I like a quiet Yule," he explained. "We might go to the theater once or twice, but otherwise we take the opportunity to shut out the world for a few days and just enjoy the peace. But I really do appreciate the invitation. It's very kind of you."

Sitting across his desk from him, I smiled and shrugged. "You'd be very welcome. But I don't blame you. Yule seems to be a time of peace and reflection for a lot of people."

"I assume you'll be burning a Yule log?" He asked with a smile.

"I'd be surprised if we didn't," I returned his smile. "Mom always liked to get the biggest one she could, and her old fireplace was pretty big. I imagine she'll bully Jonathan into getting one."

Hollis laughed. "Yes, I can see that. I was absolutely charmed by your mother when I met her in May, and I can definitely see her keeping my old friend under her thumb. Dear girl, go home, enjoy the holiday. Take your boyfriend and let them torment him a bit."

I giggled. "Oh, I'll get him there if I have to drag him by the ears."

"I don't know about this, Alys," Ben's voice said in my ear the next morning. I had reached him by telephone in his office at Scotland Yard (a rarity in and of itself...his office tended to collect dust and closed files, and not much else) and immediately sprung the invitation on him.

"Come on," I cajoled gently. "It'll be fun. We can build a snowman, have snowball fights, drink cocoa in front of a roaring fire..."

"As long as it's not me on fire," Ben said dryly.

"Bentley Donovan," I said, my voice rippling with amusement, "Are you scared of my parents?" It felt strangely good to say 'parents' instead of mother. I'd have to find some way to tease Jonathan with the statement while we were visiting.

He sighed. "Isn't every guy afraid of his girlfriend's parents?"

"But you already know my parents," I said in a soothing, reasonable tone.

"I respect Jonathan a lot," he replied, "And your mother was a godsend during the first few weeks of your therapy...but I'm not sure about spending several days with them as your

boyfriend..." He trailed off into silence, then sighed again. "Will it make you happy?"

"Yes," I said without having to think about it. "I finally have more family than just my mom, and I want as many of them there for the holiday as possible."

When he replied, his voice was warm and affectionate. "For you, love, I'd move mountains. All right, when do we leave?"

His words warmed me deeply. "I'll let you know as soon as I've finalized arrangements. You'll be able to get away?"

"I have enough vacation time stacked up to take a few days over the holidays," he said. "You just let me know when you want to leave, and I'll be there to pick you and the girls up. But don't be surprised if I get called in to do something."

"I won't be," I said with a sigh. I was well aware that because of the regular increase in supernatural activity, Ben - and therefore I - might get called to look into something. "As long as nobody asks us to investigate sightings of the Wild Hunt," I added. "The idea of having anything to do with Herne or the Erl King really doesn't appeal to me." Especially since I now knew that they might, technically, be relatives on my father's side. That was just too creepy.

"Fervently seconded," Ben replied with a laugh. "No Wild Hunt, check. I'd better go. Am I still picking you up for dinner and the theater tonight?"

"I hope so," I replied teasingly. "Otherwise that new green silk dress I bought is going to go to waste."

"Is that the one you picked up while we were out two days ago?"

"Yes it is," I smiled. While relatively modest, with a high halter-style neck and bare shoulders, it was tight and came scandalously close to being too short for current styles...which meant it stopped about an inch above my knees. My mother probably would have had a heart attack if she saw me in it...either that, or gone out to get one herself. Thank goodness Hollis was generous with my salary.

There was a long pause, and when Ben spoke again he sounded a little breathless. "We can't have that going to waste. I'll see you at six?"

"I'll be waiting." I practically purred it into the receiver and was rewarded with a gulp and a clatter as he fumbled the phone while trying to hang it up.

Athena, sitting nearby, giggled as I hung up the phone. "He's going to explode soon if you keep doing that."

"Fun, isn't it?" I gave her a wicked grin, then sat back and sighed. "I wish you could've been there when I studied with those Tantric mages."

She blushed. "I've seen some of your memories of them. I'm not sure I could've handled it."

"Oh, I thought I was going to die of embarrassment for the first couple of weeks," I laughed and closed my eyes. "I never thought I'd look back on those months with fondness. But I find myself very glad of the lessons now."

"Because they let you drive Ben up the wall?"

I opened my eyes and smiled at her. "That too."

Athena looked at me curiously, cocking her head to one side, her feline ears shifting thoughtfully as she considered my statement. Then her tail twitched and she smiled. "Because you can enjoy flirting with Ben without being embarrassed by it."

I nodded. "Precisely so." I stretched and rose. "I want to cast a Sending to mom and Jonathan so we can start making plans. Then we still have time to do a bit of research before lunch."

Three weeks later found us waiting out in front of Hollis's townhouse for Ben to pick us up. It had snowed heavily the previous day - a minor miracle in London - coating everything in a pretty layer of clean white and reminding me powerfully of precisely why I was looking forward to getting out of the city for a few days. Don't get me wrong, living in a city has its benefits...quite a lot of them. But it also had a tendency to dull your sense as a self-defense mechanism against all of the sights, smells and general noise that a city generates. I was looking forward to getting out into the countryside, reconnecting with nature and letting my senses run wild and free again.

And giving my familiars more room to play in the snow. Athena sprinted past, wearing boots and a jacket for a change and giggling madly. A moment later, Artemis - already covered in snow, thus the chase - caught up to her and tackled her into the low snowbank I'd made while using magic to clear the sidewalk and a path to the door and street earlier that morning. There was a brief scuffle that resulted in Athena reclining in the snowbank, laughing gleefully as Artemis padded regally back over to sit beside me where she'd been before Athena's snowball had struck her.

<<Athena-sister is crazed,>> she reported, shaking the snow from her fur. <<Snow drove her mad.>>

"I've heard that can happen," I replied with a smile, bending to brush some of the snow from the top of her head. "Take pity on her."

<<Always pity Athena-sister. Foolish to want thumbs. Now she has to do all sorts of work.>> Artemis groomed one of her fore paws pointedly.

I chuckled. This was a long-running joke at Athena's expense, and one which she didn't mind. The one thing my familiars differed on opinion-wise were the benefits of Athena's being Elevated. Athena was of the opinion that it was the best thing that had ever happened to her - not only because it brought her that much closer to me...

And here we get into a problem of semantics. Traditionally, familiars refer to their owners (and I do - legally - own them, however odd that feels to me) as master or mistress. I had grown uncomfortable with that, having a closer relationship with my familiars than many spellcasters, and had asked them to use my name or call me 'sister,' since that's how I thought of them. They had taken to it like fish to water...but I occasionally got strange and sometimes disapproving

looks when Athena was so familiar with me in public. Pardon the pun.

Anyway, Athena felt being Elevated had not only brought her closer to me, but had made her life easier in many ways. After all, she could now pick things up, use tools, read and write, communicate with anyone effortlessly, and all of the myriad other benefits that being humanoid brings.

Artemis, by contrast, felt no need to communicate with anyone but me or Athena - unless you counted getting Ben to pet her or her friendship with Hollis's housekeeper Elsie, an Elevated mouse familiar (wrap your mind around that one for a moment). She felt that doing anything which required tools was what humans were for, along with providing for her care and comfort. In other words, she was very much a cat, and took every opportunity to tease Athena - lovingly - about not really being one anymore.

It was fun to watch, and neither of them took it seriously. Sometimes I thought that maybe there were doing it for my amusement.

Athena approached, brushing snow from her jacket and bodysuit beneath. She was dressed in largely the same style she usually did, her only concessions to the cold and snow a pair of warm boots and a matching jacket. Otherwise, she simply didn't seem to feel the low temperature unless it was wickedly cold or if there was a strong wind. Only once or twice the previous winter had she bundled up, and both times it had been at night and during stormy conditions.

By common consent, we had packed all of our tools for work - her shieldblade and gun, my utility belt and its contents - in my bottomless bag, which was sitting on the ground by my feet. The only tool that hadn't gone into the bag was my cane, for obvious reasons.

Athena looked me up and down and raised an eyebrow. "That's a different look for you."

I shrugged. "I lost the bet. And you have to admit, he chose good colors for me, at least."

Athena looked me up and down again, then smiled. "True enough. I have to admit, it's a good look for you. And those leggings are doing wonderful things for your calves."

Ben was very taken with the fashion of women wearing cotton-lycra leggings and oversized sweaters during the winter. I had never seen the appeal...I didn't usually wear clothing that was either too tight or too loose, as prior to arriving in London 'tight' had been synonymous with 'leather' and 'tough to move quickly in,' and loose meant 'easy to snag on things or be caught by.' Discovering that there were fabrics that could be both tight and comfortable to move in had been something of a revelation. (Which makes the suburb of Killarney I'd grown up in sound more backwards than it really was - it was just very traditional, and I'd had no time or interest to waste on fashion during my apprenticeship.)

Two weeks earlier, Ben had managed to get me involved in a case involving a family group of trolls that had taken up residence beneath one of the bridges that runs across the Thames. Since it wasn't *the* bridge, the city had passed it off to Scotland Yard to deal with, and Ben had received permission from his superiors to ask for my help. Going into it, we'd made a

bet - I won't go into the specifics of what the conditions were - with the stakes being that if he lost, I got to choose his outfit to wear when we went to Swindon, and if I lost, he got to choose mine.

I lost. It had been kind of embarrassing, and I'd had to replace the coat I was wearing at the time. Note to those who are interested in doing this sort of thing for a living: Troll slime feels foul, smells awful, and doesn't come out of oilcloth. Also, don't burn it to dispose of it. Really, just don't.

Ben had shown up two days later bearing several boxes from a clothier he knew I liked in downtown London - the same shop which made most of Athena's clothes and all of my under-armor, in fact. They'd already had my measurements, so he'd had no trouble getting an outfit custom-made for me. The outfit in question? Dark green leggings that were perfectly fitted for my legs, an oversized cable-knit turtle-necked sweater in dark browns and reds, and a pair of low-heeled leather ankle boots that matched the sweater.

To go under the sweater, he'd had the shopkeeper (a lovely older woman named Mrs. Fenley, who always made me think of what a grandmother should be like - plump, friendly and always fussing over her customers) make a special bodysuit for me. At a glance, it had appeared to be a simple cotton-lycra bodysuit in a dark green that matched the leggings, with a full back, bare shoulders and a mock turtleneck. But there was a shimmery quality to the fabric that had told me at a glance that there was something unusual about it, and when I'd touched it I'd felt the magic in the fabric.

There was a note included (in Mrs. Fenley's elegant handwriting) letting me know that it was a new fabric she was experimenting with and that she'd appreciate my feedback once I'd been using it for a while. The fabric itself was woven with a mix of kevlar fibers and finely extruded titanium mesh, then heavily enchanted for flexibility, durability, all-weather comfort and stain resistance (seriously). The end result was a garment that was as thin and light as silk, as form-fitting as a fitted racing-style bathing suit, and highly resistant to penetration. According to her note, it would be extremely difficult to cut or penetrate with blades, and would stop most small and medium caliber bullets entirely. Additionally, it had some minor defensive magic woven into it (using the titanium mesh) that would disperse some of the energy of heat, cold and electric-based spells that struck it, as well absorbing some kinetic energy.

It must have cost Ben a small fortune, but by the time I'd finished getting dressed I'd already resolved to try to get a few more.

All told, the outfit was surprisingly comfortable and warm enough for cold weather. Comfortable, sexy and practical. When you've got a boyfriend who can think in terms of all three at once, you wear what he buys for you and thank the gods that he's more intelligent and sensitive than 90% of men. Also, he had accepted the habit I'd gotten into of wearing my armor all the time, in spite of it having come about due to feeling vulnerable after my injuries...and found a way for me to wear something that was lighter and more comfortable for casual-wear

than my usual reinforced leather bodysuits, while still providing some protection.

I really did love him.

As if thinking of him had summoned him, Ben pulled up to the curb in an unfamiliar car - probably drawn from the Scotland Yard motor pool - and waved before climbing out and coming towards us.

Until a year ago, automobiles had been something of a novelty to me. Sure, they'd had some in Dublin...but where I'd grown up outside Killarney they were almost completely unheard of. Steam and magic-driven cars were still a bit too expensive for everyone to own one, but the prices were coming down quickly. There had been a couple of attempts over the years to expand into the use of refined oil as a cheap fuel source, but it had never caught on - it smelled bad, generated more pollution than any sane person would be comfortable with, and the refining process had been too easy to gain a monopoly over. The three companies that had tried to make a go out of it had driven themselves out of business within five years.

It had taken me a few months after arriving in London to get used to the idea of being to simply call for a cab (or flag one down) to take me somewhere for a fairly reasonable fee. Cab services; making life easier for professional mages every day.

Ben stopped a few feet away, his eyes drifting down to my legs and back up. "I wasn't really sure you'd wear it. You look good."

I smiled up at him. "It's very comfortable, actually. Shall we go?" I bent to pick up the bag...only to discover that Athena had silently scooped it up already. She gave me a winsome smile and trotted lightly down the walk towards the car, her tail swishing back and forth jauntily. Artemis rubbed up against Ben's leg before following her sister.

"She's going to have to start letting me do things for myself again eventually," I said quietly.

"She will," Ben assured me, "When she's ready. And when you stop being agitated by it."

"I'm not..."

"You're tapping your cane," he said gently.

I looked down and realized he was right. I was rhythmically tapping my cane on the walk. "Damn," I muttered, forcing myself to stop, then sighed. "I don't know what's wrong with me today. I'm all out of sorts."

He took the last couple of steps to me and hugged me, bending to give me a warm kiss. "You're allowed. It's Yule, and I'm sure that somewhere in the back of your mind you're thinking 'I didn't have to walk with a cane last year,' or something of the sort."

"You know me far too well, Ben Donovan."

He smiled and turned, looping an arm around my shoulders and leading me down to the car. "It was in the job description. 'Wanted,'" his voice turned into a theater announcer's voice, "'Boyfriend, must be tall, handsome, strong, and psychic.' I have to work hard to fill the requirements, but it's worth it."

I laughed and gave him a one-armed hug, then let him hand me into car's passenger seat. Athena and Artemis had already taken over the back seat, and Ben hurried around to climb back in on the driver's side. He turned up the heat a little to warm the inside of the car back up, put it in gear, and slowly pressed the accelerator down carefully to pull away from the curb without sliding on the slippery streets. Then he grinned and picked up speed, heading for the motorway. "We're off!"

Chapter 2

Swindon was only about an hour and a half from London on a clear day. But what had been six inches of snow in the city turned out to be over a foot once we left the city behind, and it was still snowing. The roads were slippery, and on three occasions we had to stop while overturned carts (or cars) were dealt with. In the end, it was almost four hours before the motorway poured us into downtown Swindon.

If you've never been there, Swindon is kind of a curious place. It's halfway to nowhere in particular, and not on a direct line to anywhere if you're traveling south-west from London...or following Ley Lines, of which there are two small ones and one large one that cross one another there. Yet somehow it had managed to become a hub of travel and commerce alike, hosting train and airship stations, a warehouse district for companies that moved cargo, and all manner of stores and services. It was what Jonathan called semi-urban, and what mom jokingly referred to as 'not as awful as an actual city.'

Because it's essentially an enormous crossroads - and because of the conjunction of Ley Lines - it's also kind of a hub of general weirdness. Crossroads have always been a magnet for supernatural entities and events, so a city that's metaphorically a crossroads for travel and industry naturally (pardon the pun) attracts the supernatural. Swindon had one of the highest concentrations of hauntings in the country, at least two werewolf packs had taken up residence there (possibly three), and no less than a half-dozen European vampires lived within a few blocks of one another rather than hundreds of miles apart, as was their usual modus operandi.

That's not to say it isn't a safe place to live. Quite the contrary, it's a pretty nice place to be, if a bit generic in appearance and flavor. On our way out of town at the beginning of June, Ben had spotted a house for sale and - knowing that Jonathan and my mom were considering moving from Dublin to somewhere in Albion - had asked the Scotland Yard driver taking us home to stop so we could take a look at it. Though I suppose 'house' was kind of a stretch for the building. It was a three story gothic design that looked like a small castle, complete with a turret at one corner and gargoyles scattered about the roof.

In spite of its basically intimidating design, there had been something strangely welcoming about the building. It had a solarium off one side (then empty and rather forlorn looking) and it sat on three acres of once well-manicured lawns and gardens. Behind the house there was a walled yard that looked like it had at one time been used to grow fruits and vegetables (to judge from the three overgrown apple trees and fallow ground), and it was surrounded on three sides by woods which I learned was part of the property.

Athena and I had run the idea around for most of an hour, standing out in front of the place. It was right on the edge of town, in desperate need of love, and based on the worn flyers in a box beside its door was laid out inside for a family of spellcasters. It was, in short, the perfect place for Jonathan and my mother to move into. Mom would take the overgrown yard and

gardens as a personal challenge, and they'd have plenty of space for Jonathan's materials and for mom to nest again, as Athena had jokingly put it.

We'd taken one of the flyers, and sent it on to them the next day.

Now Ben turned into the driveway and pulled his car into an empty bay in the open-front carriage house that sat to one side. Only one other bay was occupied, by Jonathan's car, nearly identical to the one Ben had borrowed. The overgrown yard - which would have to wait for spring to really be cleaned up - was now buried under more than a foot of freshly fallen snow, giving the grounds a pristine look. Warm, inviting lights glowed from the house's windows, and a heavily cloaked figure wearing a broad black fedora and a red scarf strode briskly across the cleared drive towards us.

Jonathan. He really loved that look.

He lifted a gloved hand in greeting and arrived at the car just as I was trying to get my right knee - stiff from the long drive - to behave. He tugged down his scarf and gave me a warm smile. "Need a hand?"

I sighed, shifted my cane to my left hand and held out my right. "Stupid cold weather four hour drive idiot moron drivers..." I went on like that for a good thirty seconds as he helped me out of the car and balanced me while I got my knee working again. "Thanks, Jonathan."

To my surprise, he gave me a hug. "Any time, Alys." He stepped back and looked me over. "That's a different look for you."

"I lost a bet. Ben chose the outfit. What do you think?"

"It's very fetching on you," he said. "Come inside where it's warm. Hello, Ben!"

"Sir," Ben said politely with a nod, coming around the car with his bag slung over one shoulder. "Thanks for the invitation, it means a lot to me."

Jonathan smiled and shook his hand. "You're practically part of the family. I imagine it won't be too long before one of you decides to make it official."

Ben turned a fabulous shade of red, and I very deftly brought my cane down on Jonathan's shin, making him grunt and hop a little.

"Well," Athena said from behind Jonathan, "At least I know where Alys got it from."

Jonathan turned and smiled. "What's that?"

"Her burning desire to tease Ben," she grinned, briefly displaying her cute little fangs. "Hi, Jonathan."

"Hello, Athena." Her face took on the same look of surprise I imagine mine had as he gave her a hug, then bent to ruffle Artemis's ears. "And hello to you too, Artemis." He straightened and looked around at us, smiling. "All joking aside, I'm very glad you're here. Come inside where it's warm. We've got a blaze going in the kitchen hearth, and we'll give you the grand tour after lunch."

Ben fell in beside him as he headed back towards the house, the two most important men in my life (sorry, Hollis). Shaking my head a little in amusement, I started after them, leaning

heavily on my cane with Athena and Artemis walking on either side of me.

"How was the drive?" Jonathan asked in the foyer as we all shed our heavy coats and boots.

"Lousy," Ben replied honestly, taking my jacket and hanging it beside his. "Three accidents...a car, a truck, and - swear to god - a huge caravan that was being drawn by a pair of hippogriffs. The roads are miserable."

I settled creakily into a chair to remove my boots. I missed being able to take my shoes off standing up. "It could have been worse. It could have been ice instead of snow. We'd still be in London."

"Good point," Ben and Jonathan said at the same time. They gave one another bemused looks.

<<You know what they say about marrying your father...>> Athena murmured as she knelt to help me with my right boot. My knee was stiff enough that I couldn't bend my leg far enough to reach the damned thing.

"Thanks, sis," I said out loud, silently adding, <<Don't joke about that. It's creepy.>>

She smiled up at me, set my boots beside hers, then took my hands and pulled me to my feet again.

Ben and Jonathan had watched this little performance with similar looks of concern. I glared at them. "Stop it, both of you. I'm not a frail, delicate little flower..."

"No," Ben said, handing me my cane from where I'd leaned it against the wall. "You're a strong willow tree that was bent but unbowed." He gave me a little kiss, holding my hands. "It's just taking you a bit to spring back."

I smiled up at him, wondering - not for the first time - how he always knew the right thing to say.

Jonathan was giving him an amused look. "What happened to the stammering, shy and uncertain young man I worked with six years ago?"

Ben turned a little, not releasing my hands. He nodded in my direction, smiling warmly. "She happened."

I laughed. "Flatterer."

"Guilty," Ben said, gave me another kiss, then released my hands.

Athena was shaking with silent laughter. Artemis just looked bored.

Jonathan smiled. "Good answer. Come on, the kitchen's nice and toasty. Once you warm up, I'm sure your knee will feel better," he added to me before setting off down the hallway.

We followed him, almost silent now except for the thump of my cane, having left our boots behind. I should have known to expect something slightly out of the ordinary as Jonathan opened a door and gestured us into the kitchen. He, like most wizards, is very precise in his use of language. The words 'blaze' and 'hearth' should have tipped me off.

The kitchen was a large room, and probably had become my mother's domain. It felt like

her...earthy and warm, filled with a vibrant but restful sort of energy. The cabinets and floor were some darkly-stained hardwood, the countertops dark marble shot through with veins of quartz. There was a butcher block style island at one end of the big room near the stove and oven, a round table in the middle of the room...and the other end of the room was dominated by a fireplace that went from wall to wall and was large enough for me to stand up in (I tested it the next morning while helping mom get the fire started, and just barely had to bend to keep from brushing my head against the brick). It most assuredly had a blaze in it, warming the whole room effortlessly, but it was a relatively small one that left plenty of room on either side for old-fashioned hooks to hang pots and kettles from.

Mom probably loved it...she'd always enjoyed cooking over an open fire, and now she'd be able to do it year-round. She was just rising from taking a steaming kettle from a hook and smiled at us. "Tea's up. Come and sit down." She moved towards the table where five mugs sat in a small circle. I spotted her familiar - Apollo, a snowy owl - perched on top of one of the cabinets, watching us curiously.

"Great Thor," I murmured, awed by the size of the fireplace. "That's...wow."

"You could cook a whole cow in that," Ben said, sounding just as awed.

"I was thinking about trying," mom said, smiling as she poured the tea. "But I have no idea what we'd do with all of it."

Artemis prowled towards the hearth, looking back and forth at the breadth of it in something like wonder...then flopped over on the heated floor in front of it, purring happily.

<<Artemis likes this. We should get one.>>

I snorted a laugh. "Where would we put it?"

Everyone but Athena - who giggled - gave me strange looks. I gestured to Artemis. "She wants us to get one."

Ben grinned. Jonathan laughed and mom came to me, hugging me tightly before stepping back with her hands on my shoulders, looking at me closely. "You look more yourself," she said finally, smiling warmly. "How's your knee?"

"It's a pain in the arse," I said frankly, thumping my cane on the floor for emphasis. "It gets stiff when it's cold, aches when it rains, and the post-PT exercises are getting tiresome." I smiled. "But it's better than it was, so..."

"Everything balances out in the end," mom said with a smile and a nod. "Come and sit, have some tea. That outfit is really very attractive, but it's not your usual style..." she added in a leading tone.

"She lost a bet," Ben said with a grin as he came over. "I got to pick it. It even includes a new protective bodysuit...lighter, thinner, and tougher than her usual one."

"More comfortable, too," I confirmed.

She smiled up at Ben and gave him a hug. "Well done on winning the bet and making her break out of her fashion mold. And thank you for taking such good care of her."

"It's entirely self-serving, I assure you," he joked, then grew serious. "I couldn't help her when she needed me...that won't happen again."

Mom reached up and patted his cheek. "That's sweet. But don't make promises you might not be able to keep."

He looked embarrassed. "Well...let me rephrase, then. Even if I can't be there to help, at least I'll know I did something to help protect her."

"Not a delicate flower," I reminded them, but smiled when I said it.

Mom laughed and Ben smiled. "Never said you were, love," he said, then nudged me towards the table. I sat down between him and Athena as mom finished pouring the tea.

"How're you getting settled in?" I asked a few minutes later, once I felt like I'd defrosted suitably. The ache in my knee had dulled to a faint throb as the heat from the fire sank into it, relaxing the muscles, and my mood had improved accordingly.

Jonathan smiled. "Well, this place has quite a bit more room than my old house, so we're still trying to figure out how to decorate some of the rooms."

"But some of it fell right into place," Mom added, smiling at her new husband. "Like your study."

Jonathan grinned and nodded. "There's a room at the back of the house on the first floor that looks out on the walled garden. I'll be able to watch your mom gardening while I'm working."

The dichotomy of a Druid and a Wizard living together struck me, not for the first time. Mom was and always had been part of the Druidic culture, if not always the most traditional of druids. Jonathan was a life-long member of the Order of Hermetic Wizardry. He did most of his work indoors, she did the vast majority of hers under the open sky. I grinned. "It's important to find that balance, right mom?"

"Precisely, dear," she smiled and nodded. "And maybe I'll get Jonathan to come outside and help me plant come spring. He could do with a bit of sun," she added teasingly.

"I'm not half as pale as Alys," Jonathan retorted with mock defensiveness.

"I come by it naturally," I replied placidly.

"And I find it very attractive," Ben added, shifting his chair closer to mine and draping his arm across my shoulders. For someone who'd been joking about being afraid of my parents, he wasn't shy about showing his affection for me.

I leaned against him a little. "I thought it was the pointed ears."

"Those too," he agreed, reaching up to trace his index finger along the upper edge of my ear to its delicate point. The sensation sent a pleasant shiver down my spine. "Honestly, it's the whole package," he added a moment later, so quickly that it sounded like he was backpedaling to make sure I didn't think it was any single feature that drew him to me.

I smiled up at him. "There's the flattery again. You don't need to flatter me, Ben..."

"But don't stop," Athena interjected with a teasing smile. "It makes her feel good."

"Snitch," I said without any malice and without looking away from Ben.

Athena simply purred contentedly and hid a smile behind her tea mug.

"Perhaps we should give them one room instead of two," Jonathan said thoughtfully.

"That might not be a bad idea," mom replied. "It would save space..."

Ben blushed. "Th-that's really not necessary," he stammered, his hand dropping back to my shoulder as if he'd suddenly realized we weren't alone in the room.

I watched him carefully out of the corner of my eyes, waiting until he had taken a sip of his tea to hide his embarrassment before murmuring "Might be fun, though."

Ben almost sprayed the mouthful of tea across the table, covering his mouth at the last moment and swallowing hard, blushing furiously and unable to look at any of us.

Athena's full-throated laughter mixed with mom's, Jonathan grinned and passed a napkin across to Ben, while I sat back in my chair and smiled smugly. "My work here is done," I said contentedly.

"One day, little girl," Ben said warningly, "I'm going to get you back for that."

"Do your worst, big boy," I replied comfortably, leaning against his side.

Mom wiped tears of laughter from her eyes and smiled across the table at us. "It's so easy for me to forget that you're not an innocent little girl anymore, Alys."

"Oh, there's nothing innocent about this little imp," Ben said lightly, giving me a one-armed hug. "She delights in making me blush."

"You turn such fascinating shades of red," Athena said with absolute and unassailable innocence. Then grinned. "You two are so much fun to watch together, and Alys always feels better when you're around."

"Just give me enough warning to plan the wedding," mom said with an impish grin. At least I knew that I came by it honestly.

"I think we'd better elope," Ben stage-whispered to me, making Jonathan laugh as my mom brandished a spoon threateningly in Ben's direction.

"Don't you dare!" She said, then laughed and set the spoon down again. "Well, that's some time off, I imagine."

"Some," Ben and I agreed at the same time. Athena snickered.

<<Human mating rituals insane and too complex,>> Artemis commented from her lazy sprawl in front of the huge fireplace. <<Make mate bring you food and provide shelter, then have kittens.>>

Athena snorted. Neither of us bothered translating that one for the others. The idea of me having children would probably make both my mom and Jonathan faint. Or maybe try to kill Ben. Either way, it wasn't worth mentioning.

"Honestly," I said, "Things haven't been settled enough to give it any thought."

"I do plan to propose," Ben admitted, "But not until Alys feels completely comfortable in her own skin again." He looked down at me and smiled. "Maybe I should get you a promise

ring."

I laughed. "Maybe you should!"

The laughter was good. The camaraderie was better. Best of all was the love that filled the room.

Family. They're the ones who're there for you no matter what. They share in your joys and increase them. They share in your pain and help ease it.

My mother and I had always been close, but now I had a step-father, sisters, and a boyfriend too. My boss was more like a tolerant uncle than an employer, and he was in my thoughts even if he wasn't there with us.

I looked around the kitchen and felt something inside me I hadn't realized was tense and knotted unwind and relax a little bit. Maybe this trip home - to a new home that already felt like home - for Yule was going to be even better for me than I'd thought.

Chapter 3

To my intense frustration, the psychic damage that Brenna did to me during our fight back in April had left me emotionally unstable for several months. During that time, Dr. Morgana MacMoran - my mind healer/psychologist - had done her very best to undo the damage and teach me better control over my emotions. I'd never had a quick temper before, but I did now, and even eight months later it sometimes took an effort to control it. Likewise, I was still suffering from what amounted to a mild bi-polar disorder, resulting in the occasional fit of depression. Often after experiencing intense happiness.

As such, I'd gotten into the habit of spending a few minutes in the morning and evening meditating to center myself for the day and put it all away at night. Unfortunately, I was in such a good mood (and we were all so tired after the drive and fun afternoon) that I forgot to do my evening meditation before going to bed.

The result was waking up feeling off-kilter and down, and my usual quick morning meditation wasn't sufficient to re-center myself. So, after a light breakfast, I retired to the sitting room, making up the excuse of having a headache and wanting to take a nap.

From the way Athena, my mom and Ben watched me as I left the kitchen, I didn't think any of them bought it. Actually, I knew that Athena didn't...she could sense what was wrong, but played along because she also knew that I didn't want to make a big deal out of it. Having bought myself a little alone-time at the cost of a small and harmless lie, I settled into an overstuffed chair by the fireplace, stretched out my right leg, stared into the fire and let my mind go blank.

"Alys, take a walk with me."

I looked up to find Jonathan standing over me, already wearing his heavily mantled black coat, his red scarf looped lightly around his neck. In his left hand, he held the broad-brimmed black fedora he often wore when going out.

Draped over his other arm was my coat, my boots dangling from his fingers. His face brooked no argument, and I knew the tone of voice he'd used from days gone by – he was speaking Master to Apprentice, and I was expected to comply immediately.

For a moment, I actually considered saying no. I was comfortable. I could feel Athena and Artemis nearby, amused about something, and knew that Ben probably wasn't far off either. I didn't want to go outside. It was cold, there was a ton of snow on the ground...

I'm not a naturally surly or contrary person, and I'd always enjoyed taking walks with Jonathan when I'd been his student. The fact that I was even considering saying no told me enough about my state of mind that I knew refusing would be unwise.

Jonathan cleared his throat, startling me. "Alys?"

I glanced the clock on the mantle. Again, I was startled. Had I really been sitting there

staring off into space for two hours? That wasn't like me at all. With a little grunt, I rose stiffly and stretched. "Sounds like a good idea," I agreed, picking up my cane from where it was leaning against the arm of the chair.

He helped me into my coat without a word, dropping my boots so I could step into them. In moments, we were ready to go. "Let me get - "

"Just the two of us," he interrupted me gently. "Athena and Ben are helping your mom bake cookies, and Artemis is absorbing all of the warmth thrown by the kitchen fireplace. Let them be."

"All right," I nodded and followed him to the front door, pausing long enough for him to get his staff and for me to grab a thick woolen cap to pull over my hair and ears.

We went out into the chill of late morning. The day was gray, heavily overcast and threatening snow again at any moment. To my surprise, rather than heading for the street he turned and started to walk along the front of the house. I hurried to catch up with him, putting a little extra weight on my cane.

Jonathan led me around the side of the house and into the snow-filled back yard. He went ahead of me, easily clearing a path through snow that was almost thigh-deep on me.

He stopped just short of the middle of the large back yard and turned to face me, and even with his scarf wrapped around the lower part of his face, I could tell that his expression was serious.

"You know I've always been very proud of you," he began, speaking quietly. "You were the best student I could have hoped for, and I've come to love you like a daughter."

I blinked. "Is something wrong?" I asked, alarmed. This was entirely unlike him. Not that he was ever cold or distant, but he wasn't the type to speak his feelings - he had always preferred to show them through his actions.

Jonathan nodded. "Something is wrong. You and I are going to fix it." He lifted his right hand and held it out towards me.

I didn't see his first strike coming. Didn't sense the gathering of Anima or even suspect what he was about to do until the blast of invisible force lifted me off my feet, knocked me through the air and deposited me roughly on my back in the snow several feet from where I'd been. I grunted as I hit the snow, the wind knocked out of me by the impact.

Instinctively, I began to roll to the left, only to be scooped up by a second force spell and tumbled sideways through the air to land in the snow again. Face first this time.

I came up sputtering and spitting snow. My face felt half-frozen by the stuff, and some of it had worked its way into my coat and down the front of the tunic I was wearing beneath. "What the bloody - "

My startled, angry cry was cut off by yet a third force spell. This one launched me straight up in the air a good five feet before dropping me back into the snow. Face first again.

"Are you going to fight back sometime today?" Jonathan taunted from somewhere

nearby. "What happened to the strong, active, self-sufficient young woman I helped raise?"

"She had the crap beaten out of her," I shot back, feeling my anger rise as I struggled to my feet. I'd lost my cane and was trying to put most of my weight on my left leg while assessing the situation.

I found my cane almost immediately. Jonathan was holding it in his left hand, his hawk-headed staff pointed at me from the other. "I need that back," I said quietly.

"Then take it," he challenged flatly. As he said it, a bolt of fire leapt from his staff and shot towards me.

I lunged to the left, tumbling into the snow and coming up on unsteady legs. Across no more than ten yards of snow-covered ground I faced him, my temper making a strong bid to boil over. But I was not going to let it get the better of me. I needed to keep my wits about me.

Two more bolts of fire zipped through the air and splashed against the shield I threw up in front of me with my left hand. The heat from the fire bolts melted the snow around me, clearing away some of it and making the ground more slippery at the same time. A fourth bolt of fire came towards me and I stepped to the left to avoid it, retaliating with a cry of "*Fulmen!*" and sending a bolt of lightning crackling through the air towards him.

Jonathan caught it with my cane, using a bit of Anima and the metal of its head to attract the electricity. It arced across the space between my cane and the metal hawk-shaped top of his staff...then lanced back towards me.

I stepped to the left again and let it flash past me to gouge a steaming, hissing furrow in the snow and the ground beneath. My right knee ached, and I knew beyond any doubt that it wasn't in any condition to take my weight right now. He had intentionally put me at an enormous disadvantage by taking my cane away from me - not only in terms of mobility, but also because it was as potent a tool for spellcasting as his wizard's staff. I was hampered by my knee, missing a tool I relied on - maybe too much - and covered in half-melted snow.

I felt a brief stab of despair. At my best, I'd never come close to winning one of these practice duels. I'd never even managed to fight Jonathan to a draw unless he let me. Even though he'd frequently commented during my apprenticeship that I had more raw ability at my disposal than he did, he had two decades of experience on me, and had always said that the focus and control I needed to channel Anima - my own and that drawn in from the world around me - would come with time and experience.

Control...

"Master," I called, falling back on old habits without meaning to, "I'm not ready for a duel! It's too danger - "

I was cut off as he threw his own bolt of lightning at me. It went to my left, forcing me to either dodge to the right or try to deflect and diffuse it with a shield. The first seemed like a non-starter, so I threw up a rough shield and angled it towards the ground off to my left. The bolt struck it, skittered along its surface with an intensity that made my fingertips tingle, then burned

through the snow and blasted a small hole in the ground.

My relief was premature. His second lightning bolt blew through my hastily erected shield and struck me squarely in the chest.

Practice duels can get out of hand, but one of the first things every spellcaster learns is how to moderate the amount of power going into a spell. The worst I'd ever gotten from one of our duels had been bruises, small burns, scrapes and scratches - nothing that wouldn't heal in a day or two. So it wasn't much as lightning went, a lot more flash than bang. But if you've never been electrocuted, you can't imagine how painful even a little is. The muscle spasms knocked me off my feet as I cried out, the pain arching my back and leaving me lying on the ground, panting and shuddering.

I heard a bang as the kitchen door slammed open, followed by Ben's alarmed "Alys!" and Athena's strained, "Ben, stop! It's just a practice duel!"

I struggled to my feet, aching all over from the jolt Jonathan's lightning had given me.

"Why is it dangerous?" Jonathan asked. "Because you lost control of your emotions and magic while you were fighting that creature back in June? Because you think your knee's not healed enough?"

"Yes!" I cried, staggering a little as I regained my balance. "I don't..."

"You don't trust yourself," Jonathan finished for me. "Which isn't like you at all!" He cast another lightning bolt at me, then a second and a third in quick succession.

He was right. It wasn't like me, not at all. After all the intervening months, we still didn't know precisely what sort of spell Brenna had cast on me at the end of our fight. All we knew about it was that it had produced crippling psychic pain and debilitating despair.

Despair. That wasn't me either. That was the lingering effects of her spell, and I had vowed not to let it control me anymore.

I clenched my jaw and deflected the first bolt of lightning with a roughly cast shield that shattered under the impact, cast a force spell straight down to help me jump up over the second, then lunged to the right and cartwheeled away from the third through the melting snow.

Wait, what?

I landed lightly on my feet. My whole body still ached from the bolt that had struck me...to the point that I'd momentarily forgotten the ache and weakness of my knee. I'd acted instinctively and was now standing with my feet apart, legs braced...and felt no unusual amount of pain from my right knee.

Jonathan grinned wolfishly. "I knew it!"

I gritted my teeth, contained my anger, and gathered Anima to me. I used my anger to focus and channel the energy, but didn't let it take control of me as I cried "*Ignis celer!*" and began throwing bolts of fire with both hands. Back and forth, one after another in quick succession.

Jonathan was laughing with genuine delight as he held his staff out in front of him,

calling up a glowing blue shield that deflected the firebolts away from him into the ground.
"That's my Alys!"

He dropped my cane and spun his staff in front of him, sending a spinning vortex of wind straight at me. I retaliated by spreading Anima before me, creating a matching vortex and sending it twisting in the opposite direction. The two whirlwinds - spinning counter to one another - struck and dissipated.

He threw chunks of ice. I threw fire.

He was simply too experienced for me to gain the upper hand...but that wasn't the point of the exercise. The point was that I was successfully countering his spells with my own. My knee wasn't bothering me anymore, and I reveled in the restored freedom of motion, dodging and ducking the spells that I wasn't sure I could counter.

I had done this before. And even if the lesson had hurt like hell, Jonathan had shown me beyond any doubt that I was still perfectly capable of doing it now.

I didn't take another hit, though there were a couple of close calls. I'd let myself fall out of practice and gotten rusty as a result. Such duels are a vital part of every wizard's training, and while precautions are taken to keep them from being lethal, they can still be harmful. This one didn't hurt as much as some I'd fought, but I'd have bruises tomorrow.

That was fine. I'd earned them.

Finally, we stood facing one another, both of us out of breath. Jonathan grinned at me, and my temper finally boiled over for a moment. "What the bloody hell! That was stupid!"

"Was it?" He stooped to pick up my cane, then came towards me, smiling warmly. "I couldn't stand the shaken girl who came to visit. I wanted Alys Kinnear back. Sometimes all it takes is a good sharp shock. Pun intended."

Athena and Artemis appeared on either side of me. Athena looked annoyed - she was doubtless feeling a dull echo of the ache that suffused my body - and the fur of Artemis's tail was bristled out, making it look twice as large as normal (which is pretty impressive). Jonathan held up his free hand palm outward in a gesture of warding. "Don't hurt me. You know it had to be done."

Athena glanced at me, and I could feel her taking stock of my mental state. After a moment she nodded. "I don't like it...but it worked."

Artemis hissed. <<Nasty painful trick. Even if it did work.>>

Ben came up on Athena's other side. "That's not exactly standard psychiatric procedure, sir."

"It isn't," I agreed, then took a deep breath and let it out, purging my anger with it. "But I needed it. Maybe not quite so emphatically painful," I added. "But I needed the push."

Jonathan tossed my cane to me. I caught it my right hand and held it loosely at my side. I didn't need to put my weight on it, at least not at the moment. My knee was definitely in better shape than I'd thought, though I was probably going to feel that cartwheel later.

And I was in better control of my magic than I'd thought. I'd never managed to successfully cast and control that high-speed fire bolt spell before.

Jonathan walked the last few feet to us and rested a hand on my shoulder gently. "Point taken, apprentice?"

I smiled up at him and nodded. "Point taken, Master."

Mom came up on Artemis's right and looked us over. "Are you two done tearing up the back yard?"

Jonathan nodded. "At least for now. Still fancy that walk, Alys?"

I stared at him incredulously for a moment, then took stock of myself. My boots and jeans were covered in quickly-freezing muddy water. The front of my tunic was soaked where the snow had gotten down the front of it and melted. I'd lost my woolen cap at some point, and my hair was probably a mess. One corner of the hem of my coat was blackened and still smoldering a little.

Most disturbingly, there was a charred hole in the center of my coat and a roughly circular blackened scorch mark on the tunic beneath where his lightning bolt had struck me. I fondled the charred cloth, feeling the pain of what was probably a burn underneath it, and looked up at him. "That was a bit more intense than your usual assaults."

Jonathan nodded. "It was, but I needed to make a point. Do you feel I was unnecessarily harsh?"

It was a question he'd asked after almost every practice duel we'd fought over the years. Before, I'd always thought he'd been asking to make sure he hadn't really hurt me. Now, for the first time, I understood that the question was as much a lesson as a way of checking on my state of mind. As always, I shook my head. "No, sir. I'm sorry I've been - "

"Shush," he said, cutting me off. "You have nothing to apologize for. Brenna roughed you up like a pro, and you've discovered what it's like fighting a real duel against a dangerous opponent. You were hurt, badly, both physically and mentally, and we've been patient and done everything we can to help you heal." He smiled. "This was just another step. Right?"

I'd taken stock of my physical state. Now I took stock of my mental state. Athena and Artemis had found it improved...what had changed?

I could tell immediately. There'd been a darkness hanging over me for the last few months, one which I hadn't been able to shake and wasn't sure I'd been consciously aware of until now.

Self-doubt.

But I had no reason to doubt myself, and Jonathan had shown me that beyond all question.

I smiled. "A big step. But I don't think I'm interested in that walk. I think what I want is a hot shower, some burn salve and a change of clothes. And you owe me a new coat and tunic."

Jonathan laughed softly. "Consider it done."

"I've got water on for hot chocolate or tea," mom said. "By the time you get out of the shower, I'll have lunch ready and the cookies should be done. Come on, Ben, you can help me in the kitchen while she gets cleaned up."

Ben looked a little bit mystified as he paused to give me a kiss before following her into the house. Athena smiled after him. <<Don't worry, sister. I'll take him aside for a moment and explain it to him while you're in the shower.>>

<<Thank you, Athena.>>

Artemis huffed and turned to follow them inside. <<Crazy people games. Always overcomplicating things.>>

I watched them go and Jonathan came to stand beside me, his hand still on my shoulder. "You're the common thread in this family, you know. You brought us all together."

I nodded a little. "I know."

He squeezed my shoulder gently. "Incidentally, I don't think I've said as much before, but you found yourself a good partner in Ben. I've never seen a young man be as patient as he's been the last few months. He has my respect."

I looked up at him and smiled teasingly. "Are you that eager to marry me off, Dad?"

Jonathan buffeted my shoulder lightly with his fist. "Imp. Go get cleaned up. We'll do this again tomorrow."

"I'd like that."

Athena, who had stopped to hold the door for us, smiled warmly. <<Welcome back.>>

Chapter 4

The days that followed were some of the best times in my life to date. As I said before, I've always enjoyed Yule, but somehow it was even more special now, and not just because I really felt like myself for the first time in months. With a newly-minted step-father, two pseudo-sisters and a boyfriend to share it with (in addition to mom, of course), it was somehow *more* than it ever had been before. A wise man once said that sharing love causes it to grow rather than diminish and he was right.

Jonathan and my mom had gone all-out to decorate the house for the festival, especially considering they were still moving in. The house was filled with fairy lights (that appeared to be real fairies, but which Jonathan admitted were just a very detailed illusion), and mom had somehow convinced real mistletoe to grow around the house's lintels without digging its roots into the house itself. And somewhere - perhaps in the woods on their new property - they had found a Yule log that took up a huge part of the kitchen hearth and looked like it might take the whole twelve days to burn completely.

Ben, who had never really had anyone to celebrate the holiday with before and who had come with me - as he had admitted - just to make me happy, quickly discovered how much fun it could be with people you cared about. After the first day, he relaxed and threw himself wholeheartedly into it. I knew he was fitting in when I found him staggering down the hallway behind mom, covered in an enormous pile of evergreen garlands as she strung them along the walls.

On the fourth morning, a snowball fight erupted when Artemis tackled Athena into a snowbank (I was beginning to see a pattern there). Ben and my mom quickly got involved, but I had to beg off after only a few minutes because my knee was causing me too much trouble in the deep snow. Jonathan came out then, handed me a steaming mug of cocoa, and proceeded to give me a fresh lesson in the use of telekinetic magic in snow. He'd showed me a trick the previous winter for shifting large amounts of snow with kinetic magic...now he showed me the trick he'd used to pelt me with a seemingly endless stream of snowballs.

Ben, Athena and Artemis spent the next few minutes frantically trying to escape the deluge of snowballs Jonathan and I sent at them. Mom had noticed us conferring and had quickly detached herself from the mock-battle, getting out of the way just before the first wave of snowballs hit. Snowmen were made, and some crafty wizard-in-training who shall remain nameless contrived to add an exquisitely detailed and curiously familiar-looking ice sculpture of a large cat beside the snowman her boyfriend had jokingly given a tree-branch cane.

And so it went. We ate too much every night at dinner (mom is a fabulous cook, a talent which I fear I didn't inherit), resulting in Ben, Athena and I going out for a walk every day right after breakfast, after which Jonathan would challenge me to another bruising practice duel. Almost every room in the house had a fireplace, so Ben and I resolved to spend time snuggled cozily in front of each one (except the one in the master bedroom - too weird and kind of

intrusive) and made a good start on it. Artemis could almost always be found sprawled on the floor in front of the kitchen's enormous hearth, and we all took turns sitting with her...it was a nice place to just sit and be for a while.

On our sixth day there, I was thrown for a loop when a package was delivered for me. It was book-sized and wrapped in simple brown paper with a very artistic sketch of a lacy bow drawn on the front of it near my name and my mother and Jonathan's new address in Swindon in Brenna's distinctive script. There was nothing attached to the outside of it, but I could sense a vague and diffuse feeling of magic from it.

After some mildly panicked consultation, Jonathan, Ben and I went over it with a fine-toothed magical comb, sweeping it for any enchantments that might be hostile, destructive or in any way damaging. Nothing in our recent correspondence suggested that Brenna had any desire to cause me or my family any more harm than she already had, but it never hurts to be careful.

What is it they say in Rus? 'Trust, but verify.' Words to live by...or at least words to keep from being letterbombed by.

What we found was confusing...preservative magic, designed to protect and maintain the integrity of whatever was contained within. The spells themselves were old, not cast any time in the last fifty years or more. So I carefully unwrapped it, keeping my senses finely tuned to the faint magic I could feel in it.

It turned out to be a first-edition copy of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in perfect condition. Someone had managed to get it autographed - the title page had "Charles Lutwidge Dodgson" scrawled on it in a slanted hand that I immediately wanted to get validated. I had no reason to believe it wasn't his, I just wanted to be sure.

"Can we be sure who sent it?" Ben asked, leaning over my shoulder, as fascinated as I was.

"It's her handwriting on the wrapping paper. There's nothing in the book," I added, carefully flipping through the perfectly preserved pages. With it directly in my hands, I could sense the magic in it and understood what it meant...someone had gone to the trouble of carefully layering preservation spells on it.

"Here," Athena said, slipping a thin sheet of folded paper out of the brown wrapper. "This was taped to the inside."

I took it from her and unfolded it. The elegant handwriting on it read simply:

With love, happy Yule.

Brenna, Hecate and Hathor

I handed the paper back to Athena, who blinked in surprise. "And here we didn't send them anything..."

I'd been corresponding irregularly with my half-sister since the end of June, but little had

come of it other than uncomfortable attempts to get to know one another a bit. It had never occurred to me to send her a Yule present, and I felt a bit bad about it. She was very lonely and had only her familiars for company, with whom she was struggling to rebuild a relationship that wasn't dictated by them being afraid of her.

I looked up at Ben, who shrugged. "Don't look at me, I've never actually met her."

"But how did she know where to send it?" I asked.

Ben shrugged again.

Jonathan shook his head slowly, then shrugged. "It's not like our move was done confidentially, and the records of our purchasing the house are a matter of public record," he pointed out. "It wouldn't be hard to figure out where to find you this time of year."

Artemis propped her paws on my leg and peered curiously at the book and paper.

<<Story good?>> She loved being read to.

"It's one of my favorites, actually," I said, petting her ears gently. "When I was a little girl, I always pretended that it was about me."

"Alys's Adventures?" Ben asked, smiling in amusement.

"Something like that." I brushed my fingers over the cover of the book. "This must have been amazingly hard to find."

"Do you want me to check with the office and see if a copy was stolen from somewhere?" Ben asked quietly.

I thought about it for a moment, then sighed and nodded. "I think you'd better, just in case."

"I'll call the Yard." He kissed me and went to find Jonathan's telephone. (It remained "Jonathan's telephone" because my mother hated the things and had no use for them.)

"Should we send her something?" Athena asked when he was gone.

I shrugged. "All we have for her is a post office box in London. I suppose we could try...but what?"

We were all silent for a moment, then Athena sighed. "I have no clue."

<<Something explosive?>> Artemis suggested. She was slow to let go of her grudge against Brenna and her familiars. I suppose I couldn't blame her, really. After all, I hadn't completely let go of my own anger just yet.

"I don't think the postal service would appreciate that, love," I ruffled her ears. "Well, let's make sure that there's no magic on this for tracking it, just in case, then I'll start reading it to you, hmm?" I stroked her ears again.

She purred and licked my fingers. <<Artemis likes stories.>>

Ben returned not long after to report that as far as anyone knew, no original copies of the book had been stolen from anywhere. And so, the next day we had an epic reading of *Alice's Adventures*, with Ben, Athena and I trading the book around and Artemis listening in rapt fascination. She did, of course, adore the Cheshire Cat. My mother even took a turn reading at

lunchtime, and Jonathan - whose occasionally intimidating baritone turned out to be a surprisingly gentle reading voice - did the reading through tea time.

In the early evening of our eighth day there, real life finally intruded, as we'd feared it would. Frankly, I was amazed it had waited that long.

Ben and I were...relaxing...in front of the fireplace in the den when we felt the approaching energy of a Sending. I sat up, tugged my tunic back into place and frowned. "Call for you, I think."

Ben sighed and sat up, quickly doing up the top three buttons on his shirt. "Probably. I was afraid something would come up that they'd need me for."

I curled my left leg under me, once again admiring the basic utility of the leggings Ben had bought me. Comfortable, flexible, and completely out of the way. I really needed to add more to my wardrobe. "Well, we knew it was likely," I said, smoothing my hair back into place. "We'll take whatever comes and roll with it."

He smiled and leaned in to kiss me. "As always."

We felt the Sending grow closer, and a few moments later a spectral basset hound trundled in through the wall and stopped in front of us. There was a brief flash and an image of an older man stood in front of us. He had close-cropped iron-colored hair and a matching full beard, and wore a neat three-piece business suit. Something about his bearing - the way he held himself - suggested that he'd been in the military at one time and had never completely shed the habits of those days.

Ben's boss, Superintendent John Reid. It must've been important for him to be Sending Ben directly.

"Donovan," the image of Reid said in a rough baritone. "I hate to bother you while you're on vacation, but we need you back in London as soon as Yule is over. There's a cold case we need your special talent to help with."

"Well," Ben sighed, "That could be worse. At least it's not an immediate problem. But I hate cold cases."

"Special talent?" I asked curiously.

"When you come back," Reid continued, his tone just a bit teasing even if his expression was serious, "Please leave your satellite at aphelion. No offense to Mage Kinnear, but after your reports about the incident in Swindon and the thing with the trolls in London, we'd like to keep her limited to research consulting until she's been checked out by a Yard psychologist and has spent some time with a Yard S.M.R. trainer."

I winced, but I couldn't honestly argue with him. Reid was right to want to make sure I was psychologically sound enough for field work, especially after the way I lost control back in June (losing control of a fire spell in London would be the end of my career as a Yard consultant, at best). And the idea of training with a Scotland Yard Special Magical Response officer was kind of exciting. I was probably going to get the tar beaten out of me, but I'd learn an awful lot about

magical combat in the process.

"Call in as soon as you get this so I can brief you," Reid went on, "and so you can let me know when you'll be back."

As Reid's Sending faded away, Ben sighed. "I guess I'd better go call in."

"Special talent?" I asked again.

"I'll tell you later," he said as he rose and offered me his hand. I took it and let him pull me to my feet...and then, to my pleasure, he gathered me close and into a kiss. I returned it warmly, smiling against his lips and meeting his eyes as he pulled away.

"What was that for?" I asked teasingly.

"I need a reason now?" He retorted with a smile. "I'll have to have Athena help me work up a list." His smile faded and he gave me a serious look. "Are you okay with what he said?"

I almost blew the question off...but this was Ben. Not just my boyfriend, but also my partner when I worked for the Yard. He deserved the complete, unvarnished truth. I sighed a little. "Yes...and no. I mean, he's right to do it. I've come a long way, and getting some help to go the rest of the way won't kill me. But..."

He picked up right away when I trailed off. "But it still hurts to hear it said."

I nodded.

Ben smiled gently and brushed my cheek with his fingertips, making my skin tingle. "A wise man once said 'Getting hit is a small hurt. Getting up again can be a big one.'"

I looked up at him and raised an eyebrow. "What does that even mean?"

Ben's smile grew a little. "I've never been completely sure. Sounds profound though, doesn't it? But seriously, sometimes recovery's the hard part, yeah?"

I thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah."

He grinned. "Good thing you've got such patient helpers."

I smiled. "Yeah."

On the morning of our last full day there, we all went out for one last walk together. Another few inches of snow had fallen the night before, and it was flurrying lightly from clouds that seemed to threaten a fresh blizzard. But the air was peaceful, with no wind, so I had a feeling that we wouldn't be stuck there when it was time to head back to London.

Ben and I walked holding hands, not talking, just enjoying the peaceful atmosphere that fresh snow seems to bring to the world. I often felt that winter was my favorite time of year, and Ben seemed as comfortable with it as I felt.

Jonathan and my mom were out in front of us, also walking hand in hand, and I could feel Athena and Artemis close behind us. The roads were well plowed and we were far enough out on the edge of town that we didn't see anyone else as we walked. My cane tapped rhythmically on

the pavement, though I was barely putting any weight on it by then. Jonathan's daily beatings... practice duels, rather...had improved my confidence in my physical recovery by leaps and bounds.

The snow-covered silence was broken by a fearsome yowl from behind us. Athena was suddenly driven past us, face-first into the snowbank beside the road with Artemis on her back. Artemis quickly hopped back and looked smug as Athena lay there for a moment, then pushed herself up, sputtering and spitting out bits of snow. "Why you..."

Artemis made a distinctly laugh-like sound and bolted away down the street, past my parents, who had turned to see what was going on. Athena struggled to her feet, scooped up a double handful of snow and started packing it into a snowball as she chased after her sister, calling, "You are in so much trouble!"

Ben started laughing, and my own laughter mingled with his a moment later. They say laughter is the best medicine. I have empirical evidence that it's true.

By the time we reached home, the snow was getting heavier and the cold had finally stiffened my right knee up to the point that I was almost reduced to hobbling up the front steps. Ben looked like he was about to scoop me into his arms until Athena swatted the back of his head, apparently having spotted it too, resulting in the eruption of a fresh snowball fight between the two of them, probably just for the sake of lifting my drooping spirits.

Mom shook her head and headed inside. "I'm going to put on water for tea, soup and cocoa. Get your wet things off and warm up."

Artemis followed her inside towards the promise of a blazing hearth as Jonathan and I stood in the doorway to watch my sister chasing my boyfriend up the driveway with a bread loaf-sized snowball held over her head. Jonathan smiled warmly. "It's nice to have a family."

I glanced at him, realizing that I didn't know much about his life before we met. "You don't have any other family, do you?"

He shook his head. "Just yours," he said, sounding introspective. Then his expression lightened. "Ben and I have a lot in common, actually." He elbowed my shoulder gently. "You know what they say about girls marrying boys who're like their fathers..."

"That's creepy as all heck," I shot back, but I smiled too. "I could do worse, though."

"Much," Jonathan chuckled softly.

I smiled a bit more, watching as Ben - now covered in snow - walked back up the drive toward us with Athena beside him.

Ben reached the top of the stairs and smiled sheepishly. "Sorry."

I chuckled softly. "I think you've paid sufficiently for something you almost but didn't quite do."

By the time we'd all changed into dry clothes, had some lunch and were settled comfortably around the kitchen table, the snow was coming down hard enough to qualify for storm conditions.

"At this rate, we're going to have another foot by morning," mom said, turning away from the window and picking up her mug of cocoa. "This is the heaviest snowfall I've seen in years."

Jonathan made a thoughtful sound, idly toying with his mug of tea on the table. "You think the Winter Court is moving?"

Beside me, Ben shifted and for a moment I thought he was going to say something. When he didn't, I gave him a curious look and he shook his head.

Mom's eyes turned towards us for a moment. "I suppose it could be," she said slowly. "There's some weird things going on back in Éire, now that the Druid Council's fractured and unable to uphold parts of the ancient agreement." Then smiled. "More likely, it's just a really bad winter. They do happen."

"We might get stuck here for another day or two if this keeps up. Two feet of snow in a week is pretty brutal," Ben said. "I'm glad I'm not in London right now. The city's probably paralyzed. Also, I hate working cold cases...I'm not looking forward to going back."

"Have you thought about leaving the force?" Jonathan asked curiously. "You've got the talent to become a practicing wizard, with a bit of application."

Ben looked surprised. "You think so?" Surprise faded into a thoughtful expression, then he smiled and shook his head. "No, I like working for the Yard. Maybe in a few more years I'll think about it, but for now I'm pretty happy where I am."

I turned my own mug in slow circles on the table. The idea of working with Ben all the time appealed to me, but it was his decision, not mine. Besides, once I finished getting my act back together and passed whatever qualification tests Scotland Yard wanted to give me, we'd probably be working together pretty frequently anyway. 'Leave the future to sort itself out,' Jonathan had said to me once, 'But don't be afraid to nudge it in the right direction once in a while.' Well, I'd put a bug in Ben's ear later and let him know I liked the idea. Eventually. There was still the potential for travel in my future, too...

"Last day of Yule tomorrow," Jonathan said, interrupting my musings. "Are you sure you won't stay for New Year's?"

I exchanged a look with Ben, then another with Athena. Artemis was mostly asleep on the floor in front of the fire, but I knew she'd go along with whatever we decided. Finally, I shook my head, "No, I think we'd better head back tomorrow as planned. Ben has to get back to work, and so do I. And I have Yard-mandated therapy and training to start. The sooner I get that rolling, the sooner I can go back to doing more than running Hollis's errands."

Mom smiled. "You'll get both licked in no time, I'm sure."

Ben and Athena murmured their encouragement as well.

I nodded. "Now that I'm feeling more like my old self, anyway."

Jonathan smiled. "It's very good to have you back."

"It's very good to *be* back," I said emphatically. I eyed Ben thoughtfully for a moment, then smiled to myself.

Sensing my thoughts, Artemis yawned ostentatiously from by the fire and flopped over on her side. <<Human mating rituals,>> she muttered. <<Too complicated.>>

Athena smiled and stood up, stretching. <<This is going to be fun.>>

I rolled my eyes, then stretched and yawned. "Well, I think it's time for bed." I elbowed Ben gently. "First though, you have an early Yule present to open."

"Oh?" He looked interested. "What's that?"

I rose, Athena already halfway to the door. "If you want to unwrap it, you'll have to come to my room in about...oh...twenty minutes."

Ben blinked in confusion, then blushed and gulped. Jonathan choked on his tea and mom gave me a thumbs-up. It was, I felt, the perfect way to end the day.

It was indeed good to be back.

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