

"Fuck me," I whispered.
"They're werewolves."

"Of course they are," Caitlin said. "What git runs around London with a trio of tamed wolves?"

I'm pretty sure you've seen stranger things than that. I kept my mouth shut. The big gray one in the middle kept its eyes on the exchange between Lawrence and the hipster. The brindled one was watching us while the black one watched the driveway and the burning motorbike.

They blew that thing so no one could easily come up or down that driveway. I sucked in a sharp breath. *We could be surrounded and not even know it.*

Knowing I was going to regret it, I stretched my telepathic senses out beyond the immediate area, trying to get a sense of the next closest mind to our position. It was hard to do that and keep at least part of myself focused on what was going on in front of me.

You're going to have to learn to do this sometime, McCullough. Might as well figure it out now. What's the worst that could happen? A nosebleed? Blacking out?

Giving yourself an aneurysm and dying?

If this didn't work and we were slowly being surrounded, there were worse fates than stroking out and never opening my eyes again.

I began to get a little light-headed as I pushed past all the limits I'd established before. I shunted the discomfort aside. It didn't matter, not in a life or death situation.

I didn't have any doubt that this was exactly that, despite how in-control Lawrence seemed.

There. Someone was in the gardens on the far side of the house. *No. Not one. Three...four...six...fuck me.*

I groped for Caitlin's shoulder and got a piece of the sword she carried instead. The pain of the sharp metal biting into my palm brought me momentarily back to myself even as red-tinted darkness nibbled at the edges of my vision.

"James?" The sword clattered to the ground next to us as she caught me one-handed as I started to drop to my knees. "James, what's wrong?"

"It's a trap," I managed to say
before I blacked out.

A red telephone booth stands prominently on a city sidewalk at night. The booth is illuminated, and its glass panels reflect the surrounding environment. Above the booth, a street lamp glows. In the background, a person is walking away, and the city lights create a bokeh effect. The title text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

UNSETIC Files **Between Fang and Claw**

Erin M. Klitzke

Between Fang and Claw

One of the UNSETIC Files

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This is a work of fiction, one that deals with themes of religion and the paranormal. All resemblance to actual individuals, living or dead, is coincidental.

Dedication

For Nick, Gary, and Kristie,

Because without them,
the McCulloughs wouldn't have become important.

Oath of the United Nations Supernatural and Extraterrestrial Investigative Corps

I solemnly declare and promise to exercise all loyalty, discretion and conscience while carrying out the functions entrusted to me as an international agent of the United Nations Supernatural and Extraterrestrial Investigative Corps, to discharge my duties and regulate my conduct with the interest of the United Nations and my planet only in my view. I understand that at times, I will be called upon to defend myself with force but forswear the overuse of deadly force, to be used only when necessary to defend the lives and persons of innocents and my comrades at arms.

I do so swear to defend my world against all threats foreign and domestic as directed by my superiors within the Corps and the United Nations. I understand where this oath conflicts with any oath of service to military, security, or other organization that my loyalty to my conscience and my comrades should come first.

I will protect those who cannot protect themselves from threats seen and unseen to my dying breath. This is my solemn oath and vow.

Prologue

“I don’t think I ever thanked you for coming down to help us out on that case.” I watched as the Federal agent across from me dunked his sandwich in a little plastic cup of au jus. “Not sure we could have cleared it without your expertise.”

Agent Thatcher shrugged with one shoulder as he cradled the already soaking chunk of bread and meat in both hands. “Worth it almost for the Italian beef. You can’t get this up north.”

“So I’m told,” I said, smiling humorlessly. I leaned back, idly tapping a fork I wasn’t going to use against the edge of the table. The sense of agitation I could feel coming off of him belied his calm exterior. I shook my head slightly, trying to suppress a frown. “You might as well let whatever you’re trying not to say loose, Thatcher. I know you’ve got something trapped behind your teeth.”

He looked up from his plate, a brow quirking upward. “How’s that?” I shrugged slightly. “I just know.”

Thatcher shook his head, glancing at the restaurant’s populace before relaxing a fraction. “I’m beginning to see why you’re a rising star in the Bureau. You’ve got a gift for reading people.”

I didn’t say anything, just waited. More was coming.

He thinks it’s a dangerous gift. Not dangerous to himself, though, or to anyone else. Dangerous to me.

I was hoping he was going to tell me why.

Thatcher continued to stare at me for a moment longer before he shook his head slowly. His voice was quiet. “Body or mind?”

I just smiled vaguely and he shook his head again.

“They’d want you,” he murmured, almost to himself. “But with that article in the *Tribune*, they won’t be able to make you disappear. Just like they can’t make me disappear.”

My eyebrow arched of its own accord. He smiled. That clinched it.

“Your brother,” I said. “Whatever we’re talking about now, it’s got something to do with your brother. The one that vanished into thin air.” I’d read about it in his file. His brother was six years younger and had been missing since ’98, a few years after Scott and Marian Thatcher, Federal agents like their elder son, had been killed in the line of duty.

“Do you remember when Senator Monroe died?” he asked.

“Why does someone from Detroit care about Illinois politics?” I countered, trying to hide how unsettling the question was. *What does that have to do with his brother?*

Thatcher nodded slowly. “Then you remember.”

“I was twelve and it was all over the news. Big deal, state senator moving up to federal, then killed? Every newspaper, every station carried the story.” I’d have known without all that, though. The senator’s wife had been a school friend of my mother. It’d been nine years since the senator and his wife had been killed, though. A car accident on I-80 killed them both. Not everyone would remember. I frowned. “You know, they had a daughter.”

“Seen her since then?”

“No,” I said. *Not since the funeral, anyway. What did end up happening to her? Damn, that was a long time ago.* I could remember playing soccer in the yard with the senator’s dark-haired girl, but the memories of that were old, faint and fading. She’d been a little younger than my youngest sister, a little older than my younger brother. My memories of her were more of an annoying tagalong than someone who’d *meant* something to me.

Kingston had liked her, though, and been sad to see her go that last time, when we’d left the cemetery after seeing the Senator and his wife buried.

I wonder if she knows anything.

Thatcher nodded. “Think about that. She was like you.”

“Like me,” I repeated.

“Like you. Gifted. Special.” Thatcher’s jaw tightened. “Like my brother.”

So that’s what this is about. I caught a fleeting sense of anger and pain coming off of him. “You think your parents were murdered.”

“I know my parents were murdered,” Thatcher said. “I *think* Senator Monroe and his wife were murdered.” He met my gaze, eyes like a pair of flints, cold and hard. “And I think the same people who did all that killing stole my brother and stole Kyle Anne Monroe, too. I just can’t prove it.”

“Not yet,” I said softly. The bare trace of relief that flitted across his face told me I was right in my assertion.

He nodded slowly. “Not yet. Someday. Could be that I could use some help. Think about that.”

I nodded, not quite certain what he was really asking for, or what it all really meant. “Yeah, sure,” I said. “I’ll do that.”

He smiled briefly and went back to his sandwich. I stared at my hot dog.

Stolen.

Does Dad know anything about this?

I frowned to myself and realized that whatever appetite I'd had when we sat down, it'd evaporated when I pried Thatcher's secret loose. Not for the last time, I regretted talking it out him. It was for the best, though.

Now at least someone else knows the truth. Something. My gaze flicked back toward Thatcher.

If they'd killed a senator, his wife, and two FBI agents to get to their children, what lengths would they go to in trying to silence anyone who even suspected the truth?

I smiled grimly to myself. *He's got to know something. I'm just going to have to find out what it is.*

• • •

I rapped a knuckle lightly against the doorframe and ducked into my father's study without waiting for permission to enter. I was well beyond the age where I'd wait impatiently for the Ambassador to acknowledge my presence. I'd wasted enough of my time growing up waiting for him to notice me to continue letting him waste my time as an adult.

Richard McCullough's eyes flicked up from the papers strewn across the giant mahogany desk and one bushy brow arched over a green eye as he peered at me. "James."

"I have a question for you and I want you to give me a straight answer," I said as I crossed the soft oriental rug and stopped in front of his desk. I leaned forward, hands braced against the edge. "Do you have any idea what happened to Senator Monroe's daughter when her parents died?"

My father blinked at me, then frowned. "What brought this up?"

I closed my eyes. "Dad, just answer the question."

"Not until—"

Fuck. He doesn't want to tell me. My eyes snapped open and I favored him with the same glare he'd often shot in my direction. "No, Dad. I don't care if you're fucking terrified. Tell me."

He leaned back, meeting my glare with one of his own. "I thought I told you not to do that."

"It's kind of impossible to turn off. I've told you that." He didn't like it when I read him. He hadn't liked it when I first started doing it, back when I was five years old, and he didn't like it now. *Too bad. I'd rather it not be a sore spot between us, but it's all I've got in the face of someone who doesn't always want to tell his children the truth.* "You know something about this."

"I don't know what happened to Kyle Anne," Richard said, leaning forward again. His fingers knit together near the edge of his desk as he leaned against his elbows, peering up at me. "Is that the answer you want to hear?"

Close to the truth, but there's something tugging. It's not the whole truth. “No. I said I wanted you to tell me the truth.” I shook my head slowly. “But you’re not going to give me the whole truth, are you?”

“At least you realize that,” Richard said, his tone carefully controlled even as his brows rose slightly. “When did you start to be able to tell when you were only getting the partial truth?”

“First year at Oxford,” I said, struggling to keep my tone level. *Just think of him as a recalcitrant suspect or patient, Jim. That's all you need to do. That's how you handle him.* “It came in handy.”

He gave me a long, appraising look. “And you didn’t tell us. Your mother and I.”

I snorted. *You stopped having the right to know when I heard you thinking that you wished we weren't born psychic.* Three of us had some kind of psychic talent. One of my sisters didn’t—at least not that she’d ever admitted to.

That, of course, had made Kingston our father’s favorite of the four of us. Jack might’ve been if he wasn’t more powerful than Jade and I put together—and, if you listened to our mother, possibly gay.

I wasn’t sure if Dad was ever going to get over that.

He just kept staring at me and I shook my head at him.

“You really have to ask,” I said.

“Apparently.” His tone was about as dry as Death Valley. “Are you going to explain?”

I straightened and stared back. “Are you going to tell me the truth about the Monroes?”

“There isn’t anything to tell you,” he said with a slight shake of his head. “The last I knew, Kyle Anne went into foster care. Your mother thought about taking her in, but the state turned down our application. Something about being not settled enough.”

I snorted a humorless, bitter little snort and shook my head. Six months after Senator Monroe died, we were in London on some kind of diplomatic thing and he and my mother had stayed there for the better part of six years. It hadn’t been all bad, but the fact that he’d whisked us away when he did, coupled with his current evasiveness and the theory that Thatcher had just floated to me earlier that day made our sudden departure across the Atlantic suspicious.

“Dad, I know there’s something going on,” I said. “And I know that you’re bloody well trying to hide it from me.”

“Then it sounds like we’re even,” he said softly, eyes glinting with a faint predatory gleam.

Erin M. Klitzke

Is that the game we're going to play now? I barely suppressed a snarl and shook my head. "I had my reasons for keeping my mouth shut about it."

"And I have my reasons for keeping the secrets I keep," he said, maddeningly calm.

Fuck me. Now he's telling the truth? "I will never understand you, Dad," I said, my voice barely more than a whisper.

"Maybe not," he agreed, voice as quiet as mine. "But then again, maybe when you have children, you will."

I bit back a curse and turned away.

"James."

I barely paused in the doorway, glancing back over my shoulder at him. "Yeah?"

"Everything we've ever done we did to keep you and your brother and sisters safe."

Truth again. And a lot of fear. I shook my head. "I know that, Dad, but you can't protect us forever. Someday, you have to set us free. The dangers of the world are ours to face."

"Not yet," he said softly. "Not today."

I closed my eyes as I turned away again and walked out the door.

London hadn't changed much since the last time I'd visited. Heathrow was still insane and the city itself was still a maelstrom of activity against a dreary November sky. I was glad to get out of the airport and onto the street even with the chilly drizzle oozing from the sky, though I wasn't as thrilled at the prospect of catching a tube to my hotel.

Maybe I can find a cab...

"James!"

I stiffened at the sound of the voice. *What is she...? No. It can't be.*

But there she was, grinning at me as she pushed her way through milling crowds to meet me.

"Bryn," I said, my mouth feeling like I'd just tried to swallow sand.

She didn't look much different than she had almost two years ago, when I'd broken things off. Dressed in dark jeans that hugged her hip and thigh, a battered old leather jacket, and sneakers, she looked just like she had the day I'd told her I was going back to the States and that I sure as hell didn't expect her to follow me. I hadn't called. I hadn't written, either snail or email. I'd gone cold turkey and expected that to be that.

What the hell is she doing here?

"Your mother called," she said, as if reading my thoughts. "Said you were coming in for a forensic psychology conference at King's. The least I could do was come pick you up at the airport." She brushed a dark curl behind her ear and smiled. "And maybe talk you into grabbing some lunch on the way to whatever hole the Federal Bureau is putting you up in."

The ghost of a smile touched my lips. "I sprang for an upgrade."

"How enterprising of you," she said, her tone light, belying the tension I could already feel radiating from her. Perhaps she hadn't quite taken our parting as well as I'd hoped she would.

Truth be told, I really hadn't either.

"Yeah, well." I shrugged helplessly and adjusted the strap of my laptop case. "Like you said, the Bureau was going to put me up in some kind of hole and that wasn't a very appealing prospect. I suppose I should be grateful that they paid international airfare."

She reached to take my suitcase. "It's rather atrocious, isn't it? Mum was complaining about it just last week." Her fingers brushed against mine and I felt a strange, tingling jolt, though it could have been born of my

imagination rather than anything real. I let her take the suitcase as I tried to get my thoughts in order.

“Is she still working for the Home Office?” I asked as I began to follow her through the throng toward wherever she’d parked the Mini I assumed she was still driving.

“Mmhm. Some high muckety in some kind of secret nonsense.”

Her words had a ring of untruth that bothered me, though I couldn’t fathom which part of it wasn’t true. “Oh,” I said.

“And your da?”

“Still a bastard,” I said. “Still a pain in the ass. Mostly retired now, though. The State Department can’t figure out what to do with the crotchety fossil, so he mostly kicks around the house back in Illinois.”

“I’m sure they’ll find something eventually.” She gave me a warm smile, catching my hand for a moment and squeezing. “He’s not that big of a monster, y’know.”

“Only to his children,” I said quietly, squeezing back. She gave me a sympathetic look and I shook my head. “Don’t mind me, Bryn.”

“You had another fight with him. I guess some things haven’t changed.”

“A lot of things haven’t changed,” I muttered as she led me up to a tiny green and white car that had seen quite a few more miles than its owner. “Like this old bucket of bolts.”

She laughed as she popped the trunk and swung my suitcase inside. “If it’s not broke, don’t fix it. I had to replace Tally’s engine, though, sad to say.” Bryn held out a hand for my laptop bag. I hesitated a moment before handing it over.

“I still can’t believe you named your car.”

“I can’t believe that you’ve never named one of yours.” She shut the trunk and stared at me for a long moment as she leaned against her car, eyes moving over me slowly, studying me from head to toe and then back up again. Her voice softened. “You look good, Jim.”

“So do you,” I admitted. “I missed you.”

“I joined the Security Service,” she said instead of admitting that she’d missed me, too.

Any hope I had for rekindling anything lasting evaporated. “Oh,” I said. “That’s...that’s great, Bryn.”

“Yeah,” she said quietly, her tone making it sound like maybe it wasn’t that great. “It is. I...it’s work that I enjoy, anyway.” She smiled again, banishing all traces of regret. “Well, get in. I know a pub with the best fish and chips this side of the Atlantic and I’m going to treat you.”

I slid into the front passenger seat. “You don’t have to—”

"Nonsense," she said, keys jangling as she climbed into the driver's seat. "I want to. No arguments."

Truth. She really is glad to see me. I was already regretting my decision two years ago on top of it, too. *Maybe this was a bad idea. Agreeing to come back here.*

Well, it was too late now.

The engine purred as she started the car and angled us out and into London midday traffic. I shook my head and tried to stretch in the small car's front seat. There wasn't much more legroom in her car than there had been on my flight, business class or not. "Walking probably would have been faster," I observed as we inched through the city at a snail's pace.

"Probably. But on the street there's a possibility of being overheard, and I want to talk." She looked at me sidelong. "You fought with him about something important, didn't you?"

"I'm not sure how important it might have been," I said, leaning my head back. "I never got the chance to figure it out. He stonewalled me from the get-go."

"With your father, that usually means it's something important."

I smiled humorlessly. *It's a rare woman who knows your family as well as she knows you.* I'd never been able to keep many secrets from Bryn Knight. She had an uncanny knack for knowing when I was trying to spare her some heartache of mine and an amazing ability to coax it out of me despite any determination I might have mustered in our mutual defense.

I was a damned idiot to let her go.

"What was it?"

"Something about a girl Jade and John and Kingston and I used to play with when we were kids," I said. "A senator's daughter who used to be friends with Kingston. Her mother and my mother were roommates in college or something."

"The one whose parents died," Bryn said. I snapped upright, blinking at her rapidly.

"How did you—"

"Jade told me," she said. "Jade told me a long time ago. She thought something was strange about all of it, too, but she could never fit the pieces together." She gave me a sympathetic smile. "I always knew, Jim. It just never mattered, so we never really talked about it again." Her brows knit, hooding gray eyes. Pale-skinned and light-eyed with dark curls, she'd been the epitome of a Black Irish looker at the prep school her parents sent her to on the outskirts of Southampton. She'd always brushed off the boys there, though, apparently preferring a gawky red-haired American geek. Me.

Her voice grew quieter, gentler. “It matters now, though, doesn’t it? Somehow, it matters. Something brought it up—someone brought it up. I can see it. Whatever it is, it’s eating you up.”

I nodded. “I don’t know how, but it’s connected to something a lot bigger than I realize. My father knows something about all of it, too. I just don’t know why he doesn’t want to tell me.” I leaned my head back and closed my eyes again, exhaling a sigh. “But I’m going to figure it out. Maybe not anytime soon, but I’m going to get to the bottom of it. I’m not going to let him win this round.”

She made a slightly disgusted sound. “Is it always about that with you and your father? Who wins the power struggle? Who has the upper hand?”

I swallowed hard. “I didn’t ask for it to be that way, Bryn.” *It’s just the way it’s been since he realized that I could read his thoughts and emotions. There’s nothing I can do to fix that unless he wants to meet me at least halfway. I didn’t open the chasm or shut the door.*

He did.

She sighed. “I know you didn’t, Jim. That doesn’t mean that it’s any easier for anyone on the outside to watch. He does love you.”

“Please. I was closer to *your* father than I am to mine.”

“That’s because my father doesn’t make it hard to get close to him. Not the way your da is.” She reached over and squeezed my leg just above the knee. Warmth shot through me from just that touch and I suddenly felt more at ease than I’d been in months. “It’ll eventually get better. It has to.”

“I hope you’re right.” I didn’t think she was, but I wasn’t going to say it. She laughed aloud.

“Liar. You don’t think it’s possible, do you?”

“No,” I admitted. “He’s too set in his ways.”

“He may yet surprise you.” She abruptly swung the Mini down a narrow side street, sudden motion that left me uttering heartfelt curses.

“Are you trying to get us both killed?”

She shot me a devil-may-care grin. “Not *yet*. Contrary to what you may believe, I’ve never been angry at you for leaving. It gave me quite a bit of time to screw my own head on straight and figure out what I was about without interference from a certain sexy American genius.”

“I’m sure I have no idea who you’re talking about,” I said with mock-seriousness, my heart giving an uncomfortable double-beat. *Sexy?*

“Of course you don’t. Men never seem to, especially smart ones.” She turned up another street, this one far less congested than the main drag we’d left behind. “In any case, I think I’ve finally started to figure out what I want for me rather than what everyone else always expected.”

I was almost too afraid to ask what that was. She shot me a smile that told me I didn't have to.

"You'll see, Jim," she said softly. "One way or another, you'll see."

The Mini swung into a street-side parking slot barely large enough for it and Bryn cut the engine, shooting me another smile, this one a little gentler than the rest. "On foot from here."

We got out of the car and she started to lead me up the block toward a row of storefronts, shops and pubs lining an old street with narrow mixed brick and concrete sidewalks. Bryn took me by the hand and led me up the way, fingers tight around mine. "Populace can be a little jarring," she said. "But it's early enough that the worst of them shouldn't be around."

"Jarring and worst of them?" I blinked at her. "And you frequent this place? Last time I checked, you weren't a fan of almost getting accosted while eating dinner, regardless of who's doing the accosting."

"Acch, they're not so bad, and they've figured out that bad things happen if they bother me." She hip-checked me gently. "Not scared, are you?"

"Of course not. But why still go if you're constantly running that risk?"

"Best fish and chips this side of the Atlantic," she said. "Believe me, *more* than worth it."

Despite the ring of truth to her words, I had my doubts as she led me to a pub with darkened windows and green paint flaking off the wooden trim that surrounded them. The doorway was shadowed, sunken a few feet in from the sidewalk and a stoop just high enough to trip over on the way to the rust-colored steel door. "A fine upstanding citizen like you haunts a dive like this?"

"Don't let Geordie hear you call his pub that," she said as she shouldered the door open. "He'll never let me come back."

Inside the pub looked slightly more reputable than outside, though I drew more than a couple strange looks as I followed her into the dimly lit wood-paneled space. Above the long, scarred but lovingly polished bar, two state-of-the-art LCD televisions were tuned to a football match, Man U versus Chelsea. A knot of men clustered at one end in front of one of them, all dressed in their respective team sweaters and screaming at the screen. I barely suppressed the urge to shake my head.

What were you expecting? A quiet lunch? Never.

"Oi, nzuri!" A dark-skinned man called from behind the bar. "Usual or a table today?"

"Table today," Bryn called back. She boosted herself against the rim of the bar and gave the bear of a man a quick peck on each cheek. "Two pints

and two of your specialty. Is the table back along the wall that I like available?"

"For you, I'd make it be open, *nzuri*." He was a huge man, dreadlocks dangling to his shoulders. One half of his face was marred by a pair of wicked scars that sliced from his brow line down to his jaw. Whatever had given him those scars had cost him his left eye, too, and probably in a fashion more unpleasant than I wanted to think about.

He turned his one-eyed gaze to me and asked Bryn, "Is this that bloke?"

She blushed. "Geordie."

"Well?"

"I'm pretty sure it's none of your business," she said, starting to go even more red as I watched. I canted my head to one side.

What was she saying about me? My senses skated over her surface thoughts and almost got me blushing. *She really thinks that I...?* I clamped down on the thought before she realized I was reading her.

The barman grinned, as if he'd already figured it out. "All right, fine then. Table's open, go have a seat. I'll send Sandy over with the pints."

"Thank you," Bryn said, sounding eternally grateful as she seized my hand and dragged me away from the bar, through some shadows and toward another, slightly larger seating area beyond them. She brought me to a small table for two pressed up against the wall near the opening of the larger room and seated herself in the chair that left her facing the door, her back to the rest of the room.

"What's his story?" I asked as I sank into the other chair. "Seems like you've known him a while."

"Since I moved to London," she said, crossing one leg over the other and stretching. "What d'ya mean, story?"

I gestured vaguely toward my face, glancing back over my shoulder to make sure he wasn't going to overhear us. There was no way he could, I realized as I listened to the group of football fans erupt in another round of heartily cursing at the officials, as if they'd be able to hear them through the screen.

"Oh, that." Bryn shook her head. "He was in the service and did a peacekeeping stint in Somalia or somewhere like that. Big cat came up in the night while he was on guard duty and took a piece out of his face before the other sentry shot it in the head."

"Oh." What the hell else do you say to a story like that? "Royal Army?"

She nodded. "He was born and raised in the East End. Parents from god only knows where." She turned sideways in her chair, leaned back against the wall and propped her chin up on an elbow, peering at me. "You don't have

to worry about my safety if he's around."

"That's good to know," I said. *Her confidence is reassuring, but still...*

The fingers of her free hand wrapped around mine and I forced a smile in her direction. There was something that didn't quite feel right about her friend Geordie. I just couldn't put my finger on what it was.

Come to think of it, they all feel a little off. There were more people eating in that rear dining room, men in jeans, some in sport coats like they'd just come in for a long lunch before going back to work, a few women here and there scattered among them. Everyone *looked* normal, but something just didn't feel right. Their thoughts were guarded, for certain, as if they suspected that someone might at any time read their thoughts, but it was much, much more than that—though that alone was enough to set me on edge. Most of the world doesn't realize that there are people out there that could read their minds like books and are completely blissful in their ignorance.

There was just something strange about our twenty-odd fellow patrons that set my spine tingling and nerves on edge.

I tried to smother a frown before she could see it, aided by the arrival of a pretty blonde in a too-short skirt with two pints of lager.

"Thanks, Sandy," Bryn said.

"Welcome to it, lu," the girl said, grinning. "Just put the main course down, shouldn't be long, so don't get too cozy."

Bryn cast a quick look at me and grinned herself. "We'll try not to."

The waitress gave me an appraising look that made me swallow as much as the fact that I knew she was imagining me stripped naked did. I glanced at Bryn as I picked up my mug, trying to hide my discomfort and sudden reddening behind the heavy cup.

Bryn arched a brow at me curiously as I took that first deep draught of my drink.

"All right, fess up," she said. "What was she thinking about?"

"No way."

"That bad?"

Damn. Why the hell does she think this is so funny? I glared at her. Her sneaker-clad toe brushed against my calf.

"Sorry," she said. "I shouldn't tease."

Not like that, anyway. I stared down into my cup, suddenly very keenly aware that my ears were turning red and very grateful that she couldn't read my thoughts the way I could read hers.

"So what's the matter?"

"Nothing," I said, closing my eyes for a moment.

She snorted humorlessly. "You're an *awful* liar, Jim. Some things

don't change at all."

"All right. Nothing I can quite put my finger on, how's that?" I leaned back in my chair, watching her face. She considered what I'd just said, then nodded slightly.

"That I can accept." She leaned back again, taking a quick sip of her lager before changing the subject. "My parents want to see you before you leave the country again. Mum still hasn't quite forgiven you for leaving the last time."

"I'll have to try to arrange it," I said. "I'm not sure how much time I'm going to have around the conference schedule."

"Why, it's not like you're giving any talks, is—you're not."

I winced. "I am. Thursday."

She cocked her head to one side, studying me. "When the hell did you get added to the conference schedule?"

I raised a brow. *Was she going to come if I was speaking?*

Of course she was. I'm an idiot. "Last-minute. Dr. Kellerman couldn't come. Had to throw something together."

"What's it about?"

"The effect of cult mentalities on criminals." I shook my head. "It's just a chunk of my senior thesis that I gutted." *It's not even that good, but at least I won't come off as some kind of laughingstock. It's something I know. I'll be able to answer questions intelligently, and that's mostly what counts.*

Her fingers knotted in mine, squeezing. "I'm sure it's a lot better than you think it is."

"I can only hope," I murmured, staring into my cup again. "I just don't want to make a—"

Heavy boots echoed on the floor, audible over the sound of the football fans and the hum of conversation in the dining room beyond us. Bryn glanced past me toward the source of the sound and I twisted slightly to see.

The source of the footsteps wasn't nearly as heavy as the echoing sound made him seem. He was about as tall as I was, a bit broader in the shoulder, with deep-set dark eyes and a bristle brush of dark hair. His gaze swept over me and then he dismissed me almost as soon as he'd realized I was there, turning his focus onto Bryn.

"Stay out of this, *magetrix*," he said, his voice quiet but his tone commanding. "This doesn't concern you and yours."

What the hell is this and who—or what—the hell is this guy? His thoughts on the surface were well-guarded, but they weren't the shields of another psychic. Something felt off, and his words and tone were more than enough to set my teeth on edge. Bryn clearly thought something was amiss,

too, from the glint in her eye and the brief sense I got before I wisely shifted my thoughts away from hers.

"I decide what's my business," she said softly, even as she inclined her head to the man. "Stay out of mine and I shall stay out of yours."

He smiled a thin, feral smile. "I promise, *magetrix*, this one is none of yours." He tipped an imaginary cap to the both of us and walked deeper into the dining room.

"What was that?" I asked her, brow arching slightly. "Something that happens often?"

"No," Bryn said, her gaze following the big man. "Not usually."

"Do you know him?" I was pressing, but I was confident that I hadn't *quite* gone too far yet. She'd let me get away with a little more from here.

"Of him," she said, brows knitting. "Not part of the regular crowd, but he's here often enough." Her voice was quiet, thoughtful as she drummed a fingertip against the tabletop. "Usually not in daylight and usually doesn't say a damned word to me, either."

"He's up to something," I said without meaning to. She nodded.

"I know."

She didn't like it. Something was going on and she didn't like it. I winced at the confusion and discomfort that oozed from her but reached for her hand anyway. My fingers tightened around her hand and she sighed, exhaling and relaxing by a tiny fraction.

"But it's probably nothing," she said softly. "I'm just being paranoid."

I hoped she was right—she did, too. She turned toward me, freeing her hand from mine and wrapping both hands around her pint. I took a sip from mine before I asked, "*Magetrix?*"

She snorted humorlessly. "Don't ask. You're happier not knowing."

Why is she afraid of the question? "You sure about that?"

"Pretty sure." She wasn't sure, though, and she wasn't looking at me. Instead she stared into her cup so she wouldn't have to look me in the eye, let me see into her soul. I tried not to frown.

Why is everyone trying to protect me from something all of a sudden? First my parents, now her? What the hell is everyone so afraid of that I don't see? I see a lot more than they realize. Don't they know that it's more dangerous to only let me see pieces of the puzzle rather than the full picture?

Something cried out in the dining room and I jumped, gaze snapping in that direction at the sound of the too-human cry and ripping cloth. I shot to my feet, brain trying to make sense of what I thought I was seeing, of the panicked and angry thoughts that suddenly pressed against my mind like some kind of great, invisible weight.

A man I hadn't seen walk in leveled a gun at a tableful of businessmen on lunch, his pale skin almost translucent even in the dimness of pub. One of the businessmen lurched to his feet, flesh seeming to ripple, hair growing longer even as I stood there, blinking in shock, head suddenly pounding and mind crying out against the deluge of thoughts and emotions that weren't entirely my own. Inside, I was screaming.

What the hell is—

Bryn seized my arm, fingers digging in so hard it hurt. "Keep your head down," she hissed.

The place was dead silent and still for an aching long moment before bedlam erupted.

The men in their football sweaters pressed past our table and poured into the dining room as the gun fired once, twice. An inhuman howl left my head ringing and I couldn't help looking.

"Bryn, is that—" *If I didn't know better, I'd say that's a fucking werewolf. But that shit's not real—is it?*

"Shut up and get down." She yanked me beneath our small table as a chair sailed through the space I'd just occupied. "I have *got* to get you out of here," she growled, gaze scything between the back room and the front door.

"There are people back there that need help," I protested even as my head pounded. There were too many thoughts, too many guards suddenly dropped, and I'd been trying too hard to read the minds around me to react quickly enough to stop the mental voices now.

"Just about everyone back there can take care of themselves," Bryn snapped.

There were two thoughts in her head that were loud enough that she might as well have been screaming them in my ear. The first was that she really did need to get me out of here before I got myself killed. The other was that the stranger's warning suddenly made a lot more sense.

She thinks that a war's starting right here, right now, and we're witnesses to it.

But a war between what?

I cursed under my breath and let her yank me out from under the table.

"Keep your head down," she repeated, her voice a hiss in my ear. I barely suppressed a shudder at the fear that shot down my spine that wasn't mine, but hers.

This isn't good. This is ungluing her, and this close to her it's going to unglue me, too.

I hadn't realized how easy it was to connect with her thoughts and

emotions—more to the point, I'd forgotten how easy it could be.

Take what you can get at the moment. At least focusing on her thoughts and feelings was helping me ignore everyone else's and get myself back under control.

"Did you hear me?" she snapped.

"I heard you. Head down." *Shields up. Settle down. That's all you need to do. Shields up, take a breath, keep your head down.*

She unceremoniously shoved me ahead of her through the sudden bar fight toward the front door and the street. The last thing I saw was her friend Geordie storming out from the kitchen with a cleaver, his single eye glowing bright amber-gold, before we were outside in the London rain.

The cold drops splattered us as she dragged me clear of the doorway and to the curb of the quiet street, her chest and stomach heaving as if she was trying not to be sick all over my shoes.

"What the *hell* kind of war are you worried about starting in there?" I blurted as soon as we paused there by the curb.

Bryn shot me a look of utter terror. "Jim, forget it. Forget you saw it. Pretend it didn't happen."

"You know I can't do that," I said.

A body came flying out of the front window of the pub. It sizzled slightly and man it had been snarled, showing long, sharp fangs and serrated teeth. He snarled at the both of us, his eyes green beneath a red glow, then launched himself back into the pub with a shriek.

I stood there, blinking, for just a bare moment. "Fucking hell. Bryn, was that—"

"Bugger you *sideways*, James!" Bryn snarled, seizing my wrist.

She began to run and dragged me right along with her.

In a way, we haven't quit running since.

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