



# THE OLD ONES

*A story for Halloween  
by Jay Mountney*

I was on my way home from work when my phone pinged. Gordon, wanting a meet when all I wanted was to pick up some fish and chips and relax in front of the television. I didn't much care what was on; anything would be better than a meet in Gordon's draughty house. But it wasn't the done thing to reject the invitation of one's Alpha. For invitation read command. And there probably wouldn't be any snacks. Gordon expected his pack to eat adequately during the day. I'd had a butty for lunch in the centre cafeteria, but now I was seriously hungry. However, I sighed and turned into his street, parking in front of someone else's house, one with no drive so that I wouldn't be blocking anyone.

Everybody else was already there, most with cups of tea in their hands. But then most of them work in Rothbury, not miles away at the Kielder Water and Forest Park like me. I don't like tea and I knew from bitter experience that coffee would not be forthcoming, so I just sighed again, very quietly.

"We are all met." Gordon spoke the formal words and then looked sharply round, checking that everyone's eyes were on him. Well, of course they were. He's Alpha, after all. He'd called the meet and people would want to know what was going on.

"Brian," he said once he was satisfied we were all listening. "Tell us what you've heard."

Brian coughed and muttered then spoke up. "It's only a rumour, mind," he began. Even Gordon sighed. Brian could be long winded at the best of times. "They say the old ones are back," he said. Not long winded at all.

I was as shocked as everybody else. The locals referred to folk like us as the old ones, some with an air of disbelief and others with a hint of fear. But for a pack like ours the term had another meaning altogether.

Pete spoke up from his chair near the window. "I heard it too," he said, almost diffidently. "My landlady was talking at breakfast and said her daughter's boyfriend had seen something."

Then others joined in. Someone's colleague had mentioned feeling watched on the way home. Someone else's friend had asked whether they believed in hauntings, clearly wanting them to agree but equally clearly ready to laugh it off as one of those silly questions... Nobody, it seemed, had direct experience. All was hearsay; just rumours, as Brian had said.

Gordon looked directly at me. "No rumours up your way then?" he asked, and I knew he meant Kielder rather than Rothbury which was where we all lived. I was one of the few who worked outside the immediate area but still in the countryside rather than one of the towns or even Newcastle.

"Nothing," I told him. And I'd have heard if there were rumours around. That meant it had to be local: Rothbury and surrounds.

"It could be something or nothing," Gordon went on. "You know how people jump at shadows, forgetting to look at the solid next-door neighbours in a new light. But I think we'd all be grateful if you'd spend a night on the moor,

Will, investigating. As a ranger, you're more likely to spot something the rest of us might not see or understand."

It was once more my turn to sigh. A night on the moor was not exactly what I needed after a long day at work. "OK if I wait till the weekend?" I asked.

"I suppose so. There's nothing urgent about it and we want you alert." Gordon didn't seem to mind about waiting a few days, but his tone told me it was an order, not a request, however nicely he worded it.

So that was my Saturday night sorted: sitting in the heather on the lookout for ghosts. Still, I couldn't currently afford to hit the city's expensive gay bars, and I was as curious as the others. Could there really be something out there? I wasn't sure I really believed in all that spiritual stuff. Werewolves, yes. But we weren't supernatural, merely different. We weren't old in the sense the locals meant, either. There had certainly been some of us around for a long time, clustered in pockets like Rothbury, but none of us individually were particularly long-lived. We thought that was to do with the difference between dog and human lifespans. We hit the mid point as a rule.

I looked at Gordon, Brian, Jake and the rest. Solid, all of them. Not a whiff of the spirit world about any of them and believe me, my wolf sense of smell would have told me.

"I'll do it Saturday," I told them. "But I want somebody to stay awake or at least half alert in case I run into trouble. I'll have my phone with me in case it's pranksters and they get wise to me watching. Whose number should I have on speed dial?"

"Mine," said Eddie. Eddie was always willing to help. Plus, he'd be awake anyway since he and Ros had a teething baby.

"And mine," Alex chimed in. "Even if there's no trouble I'd like to know if you see anything. Just as a matter of interest, of course." Alex was always up for adventure and had a keen interest in the supernatural. Well, obviously, since he owned the bookshop on the high street that had an inordinate amount of material on local legends.

I made sure I had their numbers and looked at Gordon. "Is that all?" I asked. We weren't due a regular meet till the next week and I thought it was fair to assume this rumour and the consequences for me were the only reason for this one.

"Yes, Will. There's nothing else that won't wait. And you can report back when we meet properly though I'd appreciate an immediate heads up one way or the other."

There was nothing improper about this meet; the Alpha could always call us together for anything he considered important enough, and any of us were welcome to ask him to do so if we thought something needed instant action. But a 'proper' meet involved food as well as coffee, and 'proper' drinks too. And there would be an agenda, minutes, even.

I picked my coat up and turned to go. Alex fell in beside me and we

walked up the street together. He lived above his shop and my flat was above a greengrocer's a few doors along. I had the back garden, too.

"I don't know whether I hope you see anything or not," Alex said. "It would be good to have some kind of proof of a world outside this one, and it would make for good advertising if we could get it into the local paper or the tourist brochures, but..."

"...but people are likely to blame the messengers," I finished for him. "Even if they have no idea what we are, they already look at some of us askance. I'm personally hoping for a peaceful night on the moor, communing with the stars and the occasional owl."

"There's nothing to suggest you'd actually commune with whatever else you saw," he pointed out.

"No, there isn't," I said. "And I think I hope it'll stay that way."

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Famous last words, of course.

I drove up to Lordenshaws carpark. I could have walked but I was to be there all night and I wanted some home comforts, so it was easier to take the car.

I'm always vaguely surprised by heather. It looks so pretty and soft, but there it is, prickly as thistles, with the outer layer of pinkish violet covering a mass of dull brown dry and twisted stems. I have no idea why people take it home for luck.

I managed to make myself comfortable but then I'd brought a thick rug in my backpack along with a flask of coffee and a couple of sandwiches. The coffee would, hopefully, keep me awake and the sandwiches would stop my stomach growling loudly enough to cover any strange noises. I'd done overnight sessions on moorland and in forest before this. Sometimes, around Kielder, we needed to watch for vandals or for kids who thought it might be cool to do drink or drugs a long way from adult eyes. Except they reckoned without rangers; I was all ready to watch for the old ones instead. They might also be vandals or petty criminals albeit shadowy ones. Or the antics of the human vandals might be giving rise to the rumours. Gordon was right in thinking I was the best man or wolf for the task. I also knew all the law relating to open countryside, and what I could, as a concerned citizen, do about anyone breaking it.

The stars, the ones I'd mentioned to Alex, were bright and clear, a shower of light shimmering above me seeming at times almost close enough to touch. There were no owls, but then it was past dusk.

I'm not sure when I became aware that I was not alone.

I realised, gradually, without any sudden shock or fear, that there was something or someone just beside and slightly behind me on the rug. There was a thickening of the air. That's the only way I can describe it because there was

no sound of breathing or any sense of activity, however muted. And whoever or whatever it was had crept up to me unnoticed. No sound, no scent, no flash of movement seen from the corner of my eye. For someone to surprise a werewolf like that was impressive. Even another wolf would have alerted me to their presence as they got close. Scent alone would have made sure of that.

I didn't turn around. I wasn't exactly frightened about what I might see, more concerned not to startle my night visitor into withdrawal. If they couldn't even be another werewolf, they certainly weren't human, and that meant they had to be supernatural in some meaning of the word. And no, I wasn't scared. It takes a lot to scare a werewolf. The rest of the pack weren't scared by the idea of the old ones, just worried about what it might mean for us and for the rest of the locals, and about how we should deal with it.

It was quite a comfortable silence really. My companion watched the stars with me and neither of us spoke. At least, I assumed they were also looking at the night sky. It was huge, wonderful and all around us. Nothing else to look at unless you counted the heather, its colour leached by the darkness.

"Beautiful, isn't it? I never get tired of looking at it." The voice came from just behind my left ear but there wasn't even a suggestion of breath.

"Never?" If they wanted to talk, I supposed I'd better join in. "Are you one of the old ones?" No harm asking. Better not to expect an answer.

"Who are you calling old?" There was a teasing note. "Turn around and look at me before you ask again."

So I did.

He was the most beautiful young man I'd ever seen. Much more worthy of attention than even the stars. His hair was dark and fell almost into his huge eyes. My keen wolf sight could make out the dusting of freckles on his classically straight nose and the cushioned softness of his plump lips. He was young, maybe in his early twenties so my junior by a little. Those eyes held more teasing.

"You look young but you m..." I almost stammered but managed to catch myself before saying any more.

"I'm the age I was when it happened," he said, gently. He didn't elaborate but it was clear he meant whatever had caused his death.

I couldn't ask all the things Gordon would want to know. It seemed like an invasion of privacy, something impertinent and unnecessary.

He laughed and it was as though all the bells of the heather and stars were ringing.

"Don't think," he said. "Let's just shift and run. It's an age since I had a companion to run with."

I didn't question him. I found myself stripping, automatically looking for something to mark the spot where I was leaving my clothes and realising the rug would be enough. He stripped too and we changed.

He was as beautiful in wolf form as he was as a human. His fur was thick

and dark, and he was lithe and lean. He pointed north with his nose and then set off, trusting me to follow him.

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We'd been running for perhaps half an hour, up and down the hillocks of the moor, then he tripped on a heather root, maybe on purpose, and went tumbling down to a clearing beside a stream. I went more cautiously but ended up on top of his slim form, his fur tickling my nose. His throat was exposed to me as though he was submitting. I wasn't sure how to take that. Was he mocking me, or did he mean it? Only one way to find out.

I nibbled his collarbone, finding him perfectly solid and warm. I tried not to show my surprise but he grinned, showing all his white teeth, and shifted back to human. Naturally, I did the same. We don't regard it as good manners to be in different shape from our companions unless there's an emergency or it's merely the moment of change.

He pulled me close. I was thrilled and a little dubious. Sex with a ghost? I needn't have worried. It was as good as any sex I'd ever had. Better. Carefree and gentle, full of tenderness and want.

"See?" he said at last. "I'm not old."

"You're not," I agreed, "but that doesn't mean you're not one of them. The old ones."

"Does it matter?"

"Probably not." My hesitation must have been clear.

"Only probably?"

"I'm not sure what to think!

"So don't think at all. Just enjoy." He nipped at my shoulder much as he might have done in wolf form and aroused me all over again.

I enjoyed it. For a while I didn't think at all, much less question what might happen next. Then all the doubts and queries crowded in when my body was sated and gave way to my mind.

"This doesn't feel like just a roll in the heather," I said.

"I'm hoping it'll be the first of many," he replied.

"You're here to stay?" On the moor, I meant, and he seemed to understand.

"You'll find me here whenever the stars are bright." His voice was low and reassuring.

"I think that's good news," I told him, "but I don't understand. Are there others? Have you been haunting the town? Why me?" It all tumbled out, in much the same fashion as his descent to our spot by the stream.

He didn't answer straight away, then he shrugged those beautiful shoulders. "I'm Alan," was all he said.

"And I'm Will," I offered though surely the time for formal introductions

was long past. "But I still need to know..."

"I suppose you do," he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice though he was looking away from me and at the stars again.

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He told me it had happened when he was running as a wolf. Someone had shot him and the arrow had taken him in the thigh. Not fatal, or not immediately. But the pain had prevented him from shifting back for a while and then, finding himself naked on the moor in broad daylight he'd crawled to a hollow to be out of sight. He'd managed to get the arrow out and the bleeding had stopped but infection had set in. This was in the days long before antibiotics and sterile dressings even if he could have made it back to town with no clothes, no explanation, and a raging fever.

"All of a sudden," he said, "there was a door in front of me, open and inviting. The heather seemed dim, somehow. But I didn't want to go through. I didn't want to lose the moor and I sensed there'd be no fur on the other side. I hesitated and the door closed. Slowly, as if tempting me to change my mind. The heather won and I watched the door shut and fade. The colour came back to the moor and my thigh was completely healed. But there was nobody around, even in the middle of the day when they would have been cutting peat."

So, he couldn't see them and they couldn't see him. Gradually, he began to see the living world again. He even stole clothes from a line outside a farm: just coarse leggings and a tunic, the ones he was still wearing. He wasn't sure how he made them move from their own world to his and he had no idea what the farmer must have thought.

"And you were all alone?" I felt sorry for him but wondered why he hadn't immediately met other old ones.

At first he'd been alone then he'd come across one or two others who had turned away from the door.

"Werewolves, like me," he said. "There must be something about us that questions that portal or whatever it is, though there are humans who turn away too. The others aren't good company, though. They no longer want to run just for the fun of it. They race over the Simonside hills and back, fiercely competitive, growling at me and at each other, more concerned about winning than enjoying their race. I think they might be the ones who've given a fright to a few locals from time to time and given rise to the legends about the old ones that you've clearly heard."

But he shook his head when I asked if they'd hurt people or livestock. Or been into town.

He hadn't interacted with the living since taking the clothes. Those, he explained, were something he needed in case he was in human form when

walkers came traipsing over the moor. He couldn't very well shift once they'd seen him. He had a few places where he knew he could hide his things while he ran.

"One's near that horrible place where the machines come," he said. We established that he meant the car park and I confessed to having arrived in a machine.

"I know," he said. "I saw you. For the first time ever I felt the pull of attraction. Well, the first time since it happened, anyway. I followed you, stalked you, you might say."

He wouldn't use the word 'death' though he was happy enough to refer to 'the living'.

He told me he'd been thinking of abandoning the edge of the car park as a hiding place but would keep on using it because it would make it easier to meet me.

"Can't we arrange to meet somewhere else? Can't you come back to town with me?" I didn't want to cause him the misery that obviously accompanied being around cars and other machines he didn't truly understand, but I wanted to make sure I would see him again – and again.

"No," he said. "I can only be on the moor."

That made a kind of sense. He was haunting the place where he'd died. The others had died on the moor, too, both in hunting accidents. Or rather, things had 'happened' to them on the hillside. And there might be yet more in town but he didn't or couldn't know.

I'd have to keep coming to the car park if I wanted to see him. Not necessarily at night, it appeared. But if I met him in daylight and we met others I would have to be prepared for them to think I was talking to myself.

"Not everybody can see me," he explained.

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I gathered, after a lot of discussion, that only a few people could see the old ones. Others could hear them or sense their presence. Some could just notice the results of their activities (such as the missing clothing at the farm). There didn't seem to be a pattern to this and it didn't make any difference whether the observer was human or werewolf. Some cameras could 'snap' a ghost just as if they were a living person. Others would produce an insubstantial or misty image. Alan wasn't sure about cameras but of course they weren't something he'd dealt with when he was alive. He wasn't sure when he'd lived.

"I don't use calendars" he said, laughing. "And I don't really notice the passage of time."

We worked out he came from the Middle Ages. The others, the ones he tried not to interact with much, were from later, after guns were in use for hunting.

I had a great deal to think about, and important decisions to make as to how much I'd tell the pack. Werewolves tend to be homophobic if that's the right word in werewolf terms, so I wasn't about to out myself as having taken a male lover. Or admit that I would be visiting the moor again without a good excuse. At the same time, they deserved to have their worries allayed. I wondered if there were old ones in the town. I thought it even more likely that they were the source of the rumours rather than the other pair on the moor. I wouldn't be able to tell easily. I could hardly go up to people I saw in town and sniff them or try to listen to them breathing. To me, they would be perfectly ordinary, because I was apparently one of the few who could see and interact with ghosts.

Alan had no ideas. He did suggest trying to see whether they cast shadows, or reflections in windows or water. But that would be as problematic as sniffing. And to thrash those ideas out with the pack I'd have to confess to my extended conversation with Alan and that in turn risked someone realising I had a relationship with him.

I hoped I had – a relationship, that is. And Alan was happy to wait near the car park and meet me whenever I had time to drive up there. Some nights I would be exhausted after work and others I would have pack meetings, but often I would be able to ignore the television and go to the moor after I'd eaten.

When we reached the car park, we agreed I'd come not later than the next weekend. But Alan had no sense of what day it was...

"You could count six nights," I said.

"I'd lose count," he said, sadly.

"Then I'll think hard about a system we can use and I'll come tomorrow and let you know. That's not long for you to wait. But there'll be lots of cars on a Sunday so make sure you find somewhere out of reach of the fumes and the noise."

He nodded. "I'll wait here for you," he said, and I knew he would. I would arrive after dark, to avoid other people as far as possible.

"You will come, won't you?" His voice held longing. I promised, and shivered at the idea of making a promise to a ghost. Then I left. Dawn was breaking and I intended to get at least a couple of hours' sleep before trying to tell Gordon what he needed to know.

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"You don't think we need to worry unduly," said Gordon, frowning as though he only half-believed me.

"I don't think there's anything dangerous out on the moor," I said, correcting him. "There could be something in town, but as I work elsewhere, I think you'd be better off finding someone other than me to patrol the streets."

The initial rumours weren't all that clear about location and you only thought of the moor because it's been mentioned previously as being haunted. There's no reason to suppose the town is any less haunted. It's quite old, after all."

"Right. Thanks for telling me, and for making suggestions about further avenues of investigation." He sounded partly relieved and partly worried. "And thanks again for spending your Saturday night on the moor."

I shrugged. "It was worth a try," I said. "I had nothing else to do; any telly I missed will be available on catch-up, and I got to do some star gazing. Might take it up again. I've got my dad's old telescope somewhere and the moor at night is ideal."

"Don't the stars show up in your back garden then?" He grinned.

"Yeah, but even in a small town like this there's light pollution. You'd be surprised just how bright and clear they are up there."

He thought for a moment, his head on one side. "Then you can kill two birds with one stone," he said at last. "Keep an eye on the moor for us just in case any old ones show up."

"I'll do that," I promised, "but I'll probably only be up there once a week or so. Need my beauty sleep on weeknights," I added.

"What worries me," he said, "is that if the old ones do any damage, and if they're werewolf old ones, people will start to wonder, and then to accuse, and..."

"I know," I said, "and I honestly don't think there's anything to fear out there. But as I say, you could look closer to home."

There had been an account, years ago, of something ravaging flocks on the local farms. Someone claimed to see a huge wolf on its hind legs swinging a sheep round by its horns. Obviously they were drunk, daft, or just frightened by shadows, but enough people had believed them or decided there was no smoke without fire. There'd been a kind of witch hunt or werewolf hunt and whilst we were careful, it was all too possible we couldn't hide from a full-scale search for anything out of the ordinary. Or if we did, our lives would be severely circumscribed, with no running in the dark or secretive pack meets. That reminded me of something else I could tell him without reservations.

"I changed and ran for a while," I said. "Covered a huge area that way. I didn't feel anything to scare me."

"You won't want to run with a telescope," he said.

"I'll leave it in the car. I drove up and will again. Makes it easier to take coffee and gives me somewhere to leave my clothes."

"As long as you're sure you're not seen," he said, but he knew we were all alert and careful, always.

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It became part of my life. I took to going up to the moor as often as

possible. I always had the telescope in the car and knew enough about the night sky to report back to Gordon and the others sounding like an amateur astronomer. They got used to the idea of me being up there and didn't question it. And I reassured them constantly; there was nothing dangerous outside the town. Gordon and Brian were patrolling the streets on the lookout for anomalies of any kind but hadn't seen anything to worry them. Nor had there been any reports of attacks on livestock. Maybe the rumours were just that: rumours. Or triggered by all too human vandals. I told Alan about it and he had no idea. Well, of course he didn't, since he was tethered to the moor.

Alan would be waiting any time the weather was fine and clear. Sometimes we just walked and talked in human form. Sometimes we ran. Occasionally we'd go up to the hill fort and enjoy the view, especially when the moon was full. I preferred to be in human form for that. The rules on dogs were strict and even at night I thought there might be people watching who wouldn't hesitate to shoot first and ask questions later. I didn't feel comfortable anyway, so exposed, and of course we couldn't very well make love. Other times we would shift and race down the valley towards the Coquet, loving the speed and the sense of owning the landscape. I assumed anyone who saw us would think we were stray dogs, German Shepherds or Huskies.

But mostly we just shifted and ran in the heather till we were well away from any human eyes. Then we'd find a hollow where we could stop, shift back, and enjoy each other.

We were not about to have sex in wolf form. Everyone knows about knotting and it didn't appeal. The sex we had as humans was wonderful. Alan was an attentive partner and made me feel incredibly special. I could feel him and see him, solid and warm, but there was still that strange lack of breathing, something that I'd never noticed till I was aware of its absence. At the moment of climax he would stiffen and his eyes would grow wider, but he never gasped or moaned. His cock would grow, proud and erect, then soften later. We were both happy to top or bottom, turn and turn about, but another thing I observed with a slight shiver was that although he seemed to ejaculate there was no semen.

He cried without tears when we talked about what he'd lost, and he didn't eat or drink. But his mouth was soft and moist, his lips and tongue made for kisses. The whole ghost thing was one big mystery, to him as much as to me.

I'd tell him about my day at Kielder and I thought he liked the vicarious enjoyment of something outside his own stretch of moorland. I wished I could show him but once we tried leaving the local area and as I ran, I was suddenly aware that he wasn't with me. I turned back and there he was, looking sad and puzzled but not really surprised. We didn't try again.

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I'd been accustomed to going into Newcastle to gay bars, picking up strangers who didn't need to know I was a werewolf, getting some kind of sexual satisfaction that way. I couldn't look for a partner, human or werewolf, at home in Rothbury, for fear of bringing the wrath of the pack down on us. I was stuck, I thought, with meaningless encounters in the city and I'd managed to be satisfied with that. Until now. Now I never thought of going to the bright lights. I just looked forward to the starlight on the moor. And these encounters with Alan weren't meaningless. We were getting to know each other and finding each other good companions as well as excellent partners in sex. I was, I admitted to myself, falling in love. With a ghost.

The pack teased me about my sudden lack of nights out.

"I'm getting old," I told them. "The glamour's wearing off and I can't be bothered any more." They thought, of course, that I went looking for girls, and a few of them had tried to interest me in one of the local lasses, but I'd always said I preferred to love and leave them; I didn't want to do that on my home territory. They respected that.

"Got himself a new hobby anyway," said Alex. "Married to his telescope now."

"He has me to thank as matchmaker then," said Gordon. "I encouraged him to patrol the moor and that gives him a good excuse."

"Otherwise somebody would be reporting him as a suspicious lurker," said Brian, grinning.

To my relief, my change of lifestyle didn't attract undue attention and their teasing was good natured and casual. Nobody ever suggested joining me but if they had, I'd have taken them up there and bored them silly with the telescope and the sky, and Alan would have seen us and understood. Alex was disappointed I couldn't add to the legends for his brochures in the shop. I wondered what he would think if he knew it was a case of wouldn't rather than couldn't. A legend about a ghost lover would be a fine thing, but I had no intention of it ever reaching anyone's ears during my lifetime.

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Everything carried on in the new normal way. My packmates and my colleagues seemed aware that I was happier.

"Looks like you're getting some, then," remarked Jackie at work. I just nodded and smiled, not offering any detail.

"Found somebody at work then, have you?" said Alex. Again, my response was a grin and silence.

They all thought I was with a girl at the other location. That suited me just fine. The idea of me being in a relationship with a ghost might actually shock all of them even more than my homosexuality.

I was careful. Taking care and being secretive became a whole new way

of life. It was even harder than being in the closet as far as being gay went. I had to be careful around absolutely everybody. Some of my colleagues suspected I was gay but they wouldn't have stood for loving a ghost.

I read a short story about a ghostly romance that suggested necrophilia. But Alan didn't seem in the least like a dead body. I think everything but his bones would have crumbled to dust centuries ago. He was warm, solid, capable of giving and receiving pleasure. Once winter came, I was glad of his warmth. I took a rug up to the moor, but still. There were a few snowy nights when I didn't go, and I hoped he understood. Frost didn't deter me.

"I've been thinking," he said one night, running his fingers down my chest.

"Hard work, was it?" I kissed the tip of his nose and smiled to show I was just teasing.

"When something happens to you..." he began, then paused. I wasn't sure what he intended so I stayed silent, caressing his hips and nibbling on his earlobe. "When something happens," he started again, but continued this time. "I'm hoping you'll turn away from the door. That we can be together. For always, I mean."

I thought about it. It sounded wonderful but somehow unachievable. "But you're tethered to the moor," I pointed out. "There's no saying where I might be. I don't want to turn away and then find myself stuck all alone somewhere else."

"It's possible to tether yourself to a person," he murmured.

He told me he'd met a young couple a hundred or so years back. The woman had died, or as he put it, had had something happen, on the moor. Then she'd seen the man and got to know him. Their relationship sounded like ours: nights of passion in the heather. Then the man had had 'something happen' many miles away, up in Alnwick, but he was tethered to his lover and arrived on the moor.

"But how?" I hoped it might be true but didn't quite dare believe.

"I think the sex might be a factor," he said. "Not just the sex, but the longing too, and perhaps saying something."

I wanted to meet them but they'd decided the moor was boring and they'd try to find the open door and go through together, hand in hand.

"I think they must have found it because I haven't seen them since," he told me.

We continued to make love, that night and the next, and the next, and I put all my longing for him into the act. At the moment of climax I whispered things like 'tether me' and hoped it would be enough.

Once or twice I wondered whether to hurry things along, making sure I died on the moor. Alan was horrified.

"The tethering might not work if you did that," was all he would say.

I abandoned the idea, never a fully formed intention in the first place.

Instead, I concentrated on making the tethering, if it truly existed, as strong as it could be. That wasn't a hardship. Besides, I liked my life the way it was. I loved my job, my pack, the books I read, the films I saw, the music I listened to. I could build up a stock of memories and stories to last us through eternity. As it was, Alan enjoyed hearing about the plot of something I'd read or seen. And if my memory was sometimes faulty, well, we could create our own tales out of the bare bones of what I had and entertain ourselves royally.

Alan tried singing along with me when I sang the latest songs but he failed. Breathing is, apparently, essential for singing. But the lyrics were still there for us to enjoy.

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We've had a number of wonderful years, my lover and I. I've avoided any hint of my activities getting to anyone I know. But now...

I've been diagnosed with a fast-growing cancer. I knew I wouldn't make old bones, but this came as a shock. I haven't told anyone other than the medical people. And Alan.

I have some inkling of when the end will come and I'll take myself up to the moor. I'll somehow manage to avoid all those well-meaning efforts to get me into a hospice. They'll think, I hope, that I've gone to stay with relatives in the south, because I'll have mentioned some fictitious cousins. Alan will look after me during those last few days and we'll make sure nobody finds us. I know, I know, I did all that tethering stuff, but it's still a risk and not one I'm prepared to take.

When it happens (see, I'm getting to use the right terms), I'll be on the moor with my love. I'll see the door and I'll turn away. He'll be with me to hold me back, just in case.

Then it will be just us, running free through the heather for ever, with the wind in our fur.