

Glade Hall

Chapter 1 – The Hunter

“Her father seemed well respected and there had never been any police hammering on their door, so she assumed his work was probably something legal and boring.”

Σ

~ Then ~

The hunter had found a good place, next to a large dead tree and among the rotting fallen branches. He could see into the glade without being seen. There was no moon, so he had to feel for the herb bandages in his pack. The wound in his leg wasn't deep; he felt it, winced and then tied a bandage round it, making sure plenty of the herb was against the congealing blood. It was the arrow still in his side that really worried him. He'd broken off the end of the arrow, but it had gone in deep and the barbed end was still inside him. He could feel it cutting his insides, every time he moved.

It had all been their fault, the arrogant guards who'd refused to let him see the wise ones. They'd laughed at his offerings and their leader had treated him with contempt.

“A few arrow heads and some green stones won't get you in here. Be gone with you !”

His grandfather's father had obtained the green stones from a traveller from the east and they were known to be a certain cure for various bodily deformities. As for the arrow heads... he'd made them himself, bronze hardened by his own special method. They were famous among his own people, each one worth enough food for a month or more.

He could understand their words, the guards, though they had a local dialect which was annoying to his ear. Lots of soft endings to vowels that made it sound as though they weren't taking him seriously. Perhaps they didn't understand him ? He'd gone back the next evening at sunset, the usual hour for seeking wisdom from the wise ones.

“He's back, the hunter from the north with his green rocks !”

He ignored their sneering, they were dressed in the same type of skins as him. They carried flint knives, but his was made of hardened bronze. They should have respected him, yet they didn't.

“I told you before.” He said. “My wife of the last fifteen years is sick, very sick. We have two children who will be left without a mother. I beg you..... Please let me see the wise ones. They will know of a cure.”

There were three of them, two close to him and one someway off, with an arrow ready against his bow. The hunter didn't want a fight, but he still needed to weigh up the odds. The one who seemed to be in charge spoke to him.

“Your belongings won't get you in here.” He said. “Find another wise one.”

“This place isn't for the likes of you.” Shouted the man with the bow.

He had his most precious possession over his shoulder, his bow. He held it in both hand and offered it to the guards.

“I've fed my tribe for many hard winters with this bow.” He said. “It has killed our enemies and filled our bellies. I'll give it you, for just a few minutes with the wise ones.”

The one in charge didn't even take the bow to examine it, he didn't even look at it properly. The light was failing and he hadn't even taken it over to their fire to look at the workmanship.

“There's nothing for you here.” He said. “Go elsewhere.”

“There is no elsewhere ! My wife will die.”

“Then use the bow to buy a new wife.”

He'd kept his anger to himself up to that point, but no more. He drew his knife and cut the guard's throat and then thrust it into the other guard's chest. The one with the bow fired too quickly and hit him low on his left leg, the arrow hitting the bone and flying off. The hunter used his own bow and aimed true, but he felt an arrow hit him in the side as he fired. He'd been quick, but his opponent must have had arrows stuck in the ground in front of him and ready to use. The hunter saw his man fall, just as the pain from his own wound made him fall to his knees.

"No ! I can't fail now !" He yelled.

His own arrow had pierced his opponent, appearing out of his back. That one was dead, as was the one with his dagger still in his chest. The one in charge was still alive, though he wouldn't be for long. He recovered his knife and finished the man off.

"I just wanted one minute with the wise ones." He muttered.

The wound in his side was deep, so he just broke off the last foot of the arrow and walked towards the glade. Now he was hiding next to the dead tree and wondering if he'd actually chosen the right place to die for. He pulled the arrow out of his side and felt it rip something inside him. He couldn't pass out, he wouldn't allow himself that luxury. He was dying of course, no one ever recovered from a wound that deep. He quickly jammed some of the herb into the wound and hoped he'd live long enough to save his wife. Just enough bandage left to tie around his middle and once again he wondered if it was the right type of glade.

The glades in the north had all been surrounded by oaks, but here all the trees were yews. That was more than strange, it was sinister. Yews weren't of their world, everyone knew it. Yews looked like trees, but were partly spirits from the great beyond. Yews were immortal, which again was common knowledge and they were generally acknowledged to be evil. It didn't matter though, he would soon be dead anyway. He moved from cover and tried to move silently towards the glade, but it was dark and he was in pain. He fell several times and any guard would have needed to have been completely deaf not to hear his approach. He wasn't attacked though and he could see a dim light in the glade, a dull orange glow.

"Please wise ones." He muttered. "Let me see you or die before the pain gets worse."

The yew trees surrounded an oval of well-tended grass. About twenty feet long with a standing stone at each end. It was the stones that gave off the orange light. He now knew he was at the wrong type of glade, but maybe that was for the best. He'd often listened to the wise ones of his own tribe, as they gave out herbs and mumbled their rhymes. The hunter had often wondered if they really did have any genuine powers, though it was a death sentence to voice such a heresy. This glade was different though the power was real, he could feel it everywhere around him. No one disturbed him as he walked towards the largest of the stones and knelt in front of it.

"I know you can hear me." He said. "Everything I have, everything for my wife....."

A noise behind him and he turned but there was nothing there. Maybe a shadow moving near the other stone, or maybe he was close to death and imagining things ? The hunter shuffled forward and put his hands on the glowing stone.

"My bow, my arrows, my green stones, everything." He said. "Take my soul, everything. Please heal my wife....."

Pain now, far worse than anything he'd ever felt before. He'd once been wounded twelve times, trying to bring down a giant cave bear, but this pain was far worse. He screamed and tried to pull away, but his hands felt glued to the stone. He died, his heart stopped when the pain became too much for him to take.

He never knew that the deal had been honoured, his sacrifice had been accepted. A few miles away his wife was cured, the growth in her lung completely gone. She woke in her sleep and coughed, before snuggling up next to her children and going back to sleep.

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~ Now ~

Dean was behaving like an adolescent schoolboy, walking along the top bar of the fence, hands out like a high wire walker. The grave yard fence was only about four feet high, so he wasn't really in any danger. Dean was twenty and still young enough to want to impress her with his strength and agility. Emma was nineteen and still young enough to enjoy his antics.

"Fall off and it'll take a long time for the ambulance to arrive." She said.

"Fall off ! Never !" He shouted. "The mighty Dean Jenkins, knows no fear !"

He did a few turns and lost his balance and had to jump onto the ground. They were both laughing as he joined her, looking over the fence at the twenty or more gravestones. Her father insisted on calling it the old Maynard family cemetery, but in her mind it was a grave yard.

"The graves go in all directions." Said Dean. "Shouldn't they all go east west, north south or something ?"

"I looked it up on Wiki." She said. "Christian burials of that time were east west, with the head at the western end."

The hotel chain who'd previously owned Glade Hall, had wanted to move the graves and have the ground deconsecrated. That wasn't on Wiki; it was amongst the legal searches when her father had bought the place. Everything was grade 1 listed though, even the Maynard family crypt and old gravestones. There was subsidence and several dangerous holes, quite common in old grave yards. The hotel chain had put in a strong wooden fence around everything, with a few warning signs. They'd even put a warning sign on the yew tree near the gate, warning that its leaves and berries were toxic.

"So the Maynards planted their dead any old how." Said Dean.

"They were really weird. Come and have a look at their crypt."

She was over the fence and onto what was to her at least, familiar ground. She'd spent a couple of Sunday afternoons, reading the gravestones and peering into the crevices in the ground.

"Be careful of the holes." She said. "Follow where I walk."

"Should we be here Emma ?"

"I thought you were fearless Dean Jenkins." She teased.

The ground in front of the white marble crypt looked solid, but the left side had begun to topple sideways into a hole in the ground.

"Tree root damage, parts of the structure collapsing underground." She said. "One day it'll all fall over and become just a pile of old marble blocks."

Dean seemed to have recovered some of his courage and was looking down into the largest hole under the crypt.

"Tree roots, lots of them."

"It's the yew tree." She answered. "They live forever you know. It'll be here when Glade Hall is long gone."

"Looks like the roots are trying to get at the dead." Said Dean.

"Have you seen what's written on the crypt door ?" She asked.

There was a green growth over part of the door, but the Latin inscription was still discernible.

“At a time when everyone else was writing about being asleep, not dead.” Said Emma. “The Maynards had that carved into their crypt door in about seventeen eighty. Talk about cheerless.”

“Not all of us are fluent in dead languages Emma.” Said Dean.

“Sorry. The money my father spent on my education does have some uses.”

She read it to him slowly in English, giving her best Vincent Price impression. Her Latin wasn't that good, there weren't many chances to use it in rural Oxfordshire, but she'd looked up the difficult bits on the net. Not that she'd ever admit that to him or any of her friends.

'Our service has been given, now let us die.

Our sacrifice was accepted, now let us die.

We gave everything, now let us die.'

“Spooky or what.” She said. “Weird family ! They were filthy rich, yet were never given any titles. No Duke of this or Earl of that. They were always just the Maynard family.”

Dean was looking around and seemed uneasy.

“Some of these graves are recent Emma.”

“Yeah, don't make a big thing out of it. The religious college buried three of their people here.”

She knew that Dean would have looked Glade Hall up on Wiki, all her friends had. There was a lot that wasn't on there though, especially about the twenty years when the Church of Enlil had used the house as some sort of religious college.

“But you can't just bury people where you want to.” Said Dean. “There are rules and they must have had families.”

“It's legal Dean, trust me. My dad went into all this before we moved in. The ground is still consecrated, they even used the Maynard Chapel for the service.”

“But, their families..... it's just not right.....”

She kissed him and then looked right into his eyes.

“Forget all about it and don't fuss.” She said. “And no going on about it to the staff, my Dad had enough trouble finding a decent cook.”

“Yeah, yeah, fine..... you have a chapel ?”

“Yes, but it's kept locked.”

Mrs Hargreaves, their new cook, had told her a little about why the religious college had sold up and moved on. A pop singer with more money than sense had bought the place and given it to the Church of Enlil.

“Probably trying to make God forget the drugs and prostitutes.” Mrs Hargreaves had told her.

Their cook seemed to have a cynical view of the world, which got worse when she talked about the past owners of the house.

“The religious types found more religion than they could handle.” Cook had whispered to her. “Let's leave it at that. The chapel has been kept locked ever since and the hotel never used it.”

Only it wasn't always locked. Out of curiosity Emma had looked at the long list of historic obligations that came with buying a place like Glade Hall.

“Some of them are just tradition, but others are written into the title deeds.” Her father had told her. “Unless we allow public use of the chapel four times a year. Someone from English Heritage will show up and castrate me with a rusty knife.”

There were a lot of other local groups who used the hall for various public events and had done so since the seventeenth century. A local fox hunt group had once used the ground, but that was now illegal. It appeared her father was the judge for various events, including the local farm show.

"I quite fancy judging the best pumpkin contest." He'd said.

Emma climbed back over the fence and headed back towards the main house. Dean was looking with interest at the large stained glass windows of their very own chapel.

"What is it?" He asked. "Catholic, C of E, or Church of Satan?"

"Very funny. Are you really telling me you didn't look my new home up on the net?"

"Ok, a bit, but I don't remember anything about a chapel."

Emma was curious about the chapel too, but she'd wait until an opportunity arose to look at the inside. One of the public open days would be an ideal time for her to look at the chapel, maybe even get a few pictures for her Facebook page.

"Do you want me to give you the short version of the history of this place, or the long version?" She asked.

Dean kissed her, a real kiss full of passion and a promise of what she could expect during the summer break from college. He was crazy, but he was impulsive and unpredictable, both character traits that she liked.

"The short version and then we can see this famous glade."

Her iPhone refused to work unless she was almost on top of the house and the Wi-Fi connection her father had installed. Emma was getting used to looking at her watch now to know the hour and it was already halfway through the afternoon.

"The glade is right over at the other side of the estate, way past the river." She said.

"I don't mind a walk."

"It'll take about forty minutes to get there and we don't want to be there after sunset."

He was trying to tease her now, waving his arms about in what was supposed to be a ghostly fashion.

"Ooooooo, death to all who remain there after sunset."

She playfully thumped his chest.

"We're in the country now you idiot. No street lights. When it gets dark here, it really is dark."

She moved towards him and almost folded herself into him in a way she knew drove him crazy.

"Besides, my father is busy and thanks to the hotel people there are a hundred and twenty fully equipped bedrooms, some with their own Jacuzzi..... And you want to walk to the glade!?"

She was teasing him now, that was how nature had intended the battle of the sexes to be fought.

She could almost see his bottom lip quivering.

"We've got the entire summer vacation Emma." He answered. "We could try each room, twice."

"You can explore every day if you like, I've got a part time job."

She was going to break it to him gently, but this was much better. It wasn't just a weird expression, his jaw really had dropped.

"Where? I never, you never said anything....."

"Don't worry." She said. "It's just helping out at the local florists for three afternoons a week. We'll still have plenty of time together."

He perked up, there were limits to how much she'd tease him, but she hadn't quite finished. Emma let go of him and began to walk in the direction of the glade. Dean was left standing and looking back at the main building.

"But..... the Jacuzzi....."

"You're right Dean, there'll be other days."

He ran to catch up with her, linking his arm through hers.

"Fine. Now give me the short tour version of the history of the house."

"The chapel wasn't connected to the main house until the religious college built an extension that linked to it. Before that you had to go out in all weathers to pray." She said.

"It looks old."

"It is, there's a record of it in the Domesday Book. A small chapel all on its own, two and half miles from the nearest village. It's a bit of a mystery."

Dean looked genuinely interested, as they walked towards the nearest bridge over the river. All man made of course. The river, the lakes, the nicely spread groups of trees. All landscaped and created way back in the seventeen hundreds.

"So there was no house here then?" Dean Asked.

"No, the first record of a house is in Tudor times. James Maynard built the current house and two wings from seventy forty to seventeen fifty."

"Ten years! A long time to live with noisy builders and piles of old bricks."

He made her laugh, it was why she'd allowed him to become such a large part of her life.

"The Church of Enlil bought the house from the Maynard family in the early nineteen eighties and added the two fairly hideous accommodation blocks."

"So much for grade 1 listing."

"A religious charity running a college. My guess is that someone decided it was easier to say yes, than have it fought out in the local press."

"And then the hotel chain?" He asked.

"Yes, the hotel chain. They spent a fortune on the place, but never finished the golf course. We have eighteen holes, but no sand in the bunkers."

She was expecting a laugh, everyone laughed at that line. Instead he was looking off into the distance.

"How big is the estate?" He asked.

"Just over five hundred acres, there's even a small farm in the southern corner."

"That's..... got to be half of Oxfordshire!"

"Not quite, but I think Dad's working on it."

They walked on and she could just see the tops of the yews trees that surrounded the glade.

"So why did the hotel quit?" He asked.

"They couldn't make any money out of it I guess."

"I did read about the troubled history of the house Emma."

"Ok, you'll hear about it over the holidays anyway." She said. "There were a few incidents that got into the media and the hotel lost a lot of bookings."

He'd stopped walking now and was looking at her.

"I'm just worried about you Emma, the internet says there were was a death."

"Don't believe that crap. There was just one person injured in an accident."

Actually there had been two deaths and the hotel chain had settled with the relatives out of court.

They'd also made them sign a gagging order. It was compulsory now, giving full disclosure about any bad history or ongoing problems with the property. Especially if you were paying tens of millions for the place. Her father had never told her the final figure, but it had to be huge. And then there was going to be more millions to convert it back to being a family home.

"Do you know that really scares my father about this place?" She asked.

Now she had his full attention.

“No. What ?”

“A few years ago a TV show came and dug about in the grounds for a few days. The show isn’t on any more, I think they all do cookery programmes now. They found some pre-roman foundations in our cellar and now the cellar is kept locked..... all the time.”

“Why ? What scares you father Emma ?”

She gave him her best grin and began to run away from him.

“English Heritage Dean, he sees them as some kind of nemesis. He’s petrified of what they’ll do if he damages the ruins in the basement.”

He was chasing her now, but she was much quicker than him. Eventually they were stood on the edge of the glade and looking down at the two standing stones.

“They’re all yews trees.” She said. “Don’t touch them and suck your finger or anything.”

“I’m not a complete fool.”

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Jerome K Hooper was taking his mid-afternoon break. Coffee just the way he liked it and a cinnamon bun, freshly made by Mrs Hargreaves. Most of his cook’s day seemed to be filled by preparing meals for the various builders, gardeners and maintenance people. He only seemed to see most of them when they needed feeding and progress on the house was slow.

“Thank you Mrs Hargreaves. Has my daughter eaten today ?”

It was odd relationship. She refused to call him Jerome and he had no idea what her first name was.

It was the first full time domestic cook he’d had and he was still learning the ropes.

“She had toast with her young man this morning Mr Hooper, but neither of them came back for lunch.”

They were probably surviving by grazing off the wild berries and mouthfuls of junk food from brightly coloured packets. All her college friends were the same. Skinny, vegan and eating next to nothing. He dreaded to think what she was doing to her body, but she always looked healthy.

“I’ll make her a nice vegetable lasagne for dinner Mr Hooper.”

“Thank you, she has to eat something.”

Mrs Hargreaves left and he looked out of the first floor window as he drank his coffee. He was just in time to see his daughter run towards the glade, pursued by her boyfriend. He no longer thought of Dean as the current boyfriend, this one seemed to be a keeper. Emma appeared obsessed with the history of the house; she’d even spent hours going through all the pre-purchase disclosures. Their new home did have a troubled past, there was no denying it. He just hoped that once it was converted to being a family home again, that his wife would decide to join him and bring their three year old son with her.

“If I wanted to live in a four star hotel Jerry, I’d book into the Park Lane Hilton. At least they have twenty four hour room service.”

It was if she was punishing him for buying Glade Hall, but it had been a joint decision. In all fairness to her, Alice, his wife, had liked the original plan. Oleander Hotels Group were going to strip everything out of Glade Hall and the two extensions. Furniture, curtains, carpets, anything they’d put in that made it a hotel. A few rooms would be fairly quickly furnished and made habitable, while Alice took her time to design the interiors for the rest of their home. It was what she did; Alice Hooper was a world famous and sought after interior designer. Their marital problems had started, when Jerry found out that Oleander Hotels were quite happy to sell Glade Hall, as it was, with all fixtures fittings and furnishings.

“It makes sense; we’ll have a house we can just move into. They’re even leaving all the bedding and towels.”

He’d told Alice while she was living in their small New York apartment. She was there while designing an interior for a client near central park and she’d never returned. It wasn’t a trial separation or anything like that. Alice simply refused to live in a house with hand me down hotel furniture. As Jerome Junior was only three years old, he was staying with her.

“Emma needs her mother.” He’d pleaded.

“Then put her on a plane to New York.”

Jerry was sat in the room he’d claimed as his office. It had been set up as a small function room; there was even a lectern on a stage. He liked the furniture, he liked the no nonsense layout of the room. Alice was right of course, he’d gladly live with the hotel furnishings until they both died of old age. Décor didn’t speak to him the way it did to Alice, he was happy with something that was tidy and functional.

There was a clock on the wall showing London time and a travel clock on his desk, set to show New York time. Alice would have finished breakfast by now and would be looking at her diary for the day, he knew her routine well. He had a few minutes before her first email of the day arrived. Jerry moved the mouse and his desktop PC came to life. If he didn’t reply to an email within a few minutes, she’d switch to texts and then bombard his Facebook wall. He’d often wondered what would happen if he simply went out and ignored her for three or four hours. He had an image of men hired to shout up at his windows or put notes through the door.

His background wallpaper on his PC was a picture of all of them, his family. Jerry in front of the Xmas tree in the old London house, Alice hugging him while Emma undid a parcel and Jerry Jr tried to pull the cats tail. It had been an idyllic day and he hoped there would be lots more of them. His computer announced the arrival of an email with a ping sound.

‘I hope my daughter arrived safely?’ It began.

‘Don’t let her and that boy share a bedroom.’

He sighed and finished his cinnamon bun, it really was delicious. Of course they were sharing a bed, they were both adults. There were eighteen VIP suites in the main building, most of them furnished to be used as bridal suites for the hotel’s booming wedding trade. As far as he knew it was about the only part of the hotel that had ever made a profit.

“I’m using the least pink of the rooms.” He’d told Emma. “You can choose any one of the other seventeen.”

They had chosen, not her. They’d gone from room to room, while he’d followed behind them. He wasn’t surprised when they chose the suite the furthest from his. Dean had carried their bags in there, hers and his. Emma was delighted with the room and the Jacuzzi that had a device to create bubbles in the water.

“Wow, this is really brilliant Dad.”

Jerry needed something to distract his wife, someone he knew would act as a magnet for her anger.

‘Emma is here and showing Dean the cemetery.’ He typed.

‘Nick Goodwood is here with his team and things are progressing.’

Wicked he knew, but he didn’t want another lecture about poor parenting. If he’d made a point of giving Dean another room, he’d have never used it. He’d have been doing exactly the same as them at their age.

“Him ! I hope he’s brought along a few people and someone better than Sean ?”

Alice had never been like this before. She'd had to contend with builders like Nick Goodwood all the time and she'd laughed about them. Nick thought he was wearing the sacred worn out jeans of British history. There were days when Nick had actually told him;

"We can do it that way, but it's not how they'd have done it in seventeen fifty."

"I don't think they had power mixers or electric drills either Nick."

It was an uneasy relationship, with English Heritage hanging around like a bad cold. Alice would normally have dealt with them perfectly, but now she was taking it all too personally. He decided to break the cycle before it went too far.

"We miss you, please come over for part of Emma's summer break."

Over a minute and no reply, that was really strange. There had been trouble during Emma's last term at college, she'd punched another girl. Completely out of character, it was another symptom of the family tensions. The girl had made a nasty comment that her three year old brother must have been a nasty surprise for her mother. There was a lot of sniggering and cruel comments about an unwanted baby. Emma had hit the girl hard enough for the college to call an ambulance. It had all been quietened down, he was paying for their new 'Jerome K Hooper Science Wing.' Emma was given a few days suspension and made to take an anger management course.

"My brother may have been unplanned, but he's loved and wanted."

Several of her friends had told him that Emma had shouted that as she'd hit Lucy, the girl with the not quite broken nose. His daughter became some sort of hero of the downtrodden for a while, her number of Facebook friends grew by quite a large number. It was then that Jerry realised that being a teenager wasn't a completely carefree life. He couldn't reward her of course, but he'd bought her a decent watch a week or so later.

"You'll need a watch at the new place Emma, the phone reception there is non-existent."

She'd spun the Rolex around in her hand and he could tell from her expression that she loved it.

"Thanks, it'll make a cool knuckle duster." She'd joked.

About six minutes until Alice replied, almost a record.

'Is Emma ok now?'

'I could bring Jerry Jnr over for the August holiday weekend.'

Brilliant! Jerry felt his neck muscles relax. He'd give the builders an ultimatum to get at least one set of rooms ready for the Bank Holiday weekend, or he'd sack them.

'Emma is fine, her usual self now,'

'Get an open return and stay a while if you can.'

No huge gap this time, a reply after only a few seconds.

'Give her my love.'

'Two weeks Jerry, then I have a client in Washington, but I'll stay for two weeks.'

It was a start and he really just might sack Nick Goodwood. The man's entire team seemed to consist of two guys and they moved at a snail's pace. He had the money and there were builders quite willing to renovate Glade Hall, using 21st Century materials.

'Great news. Do you want me to book the airline tickets.'

Almost immediately.

'I'll do it from my end.'

'I still love you xx.'

He looked at the screen and wanted to say so much, but it would all wait until she was there, in the house with him, in their bed.

'Ditto xxx.' He typed.

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There was a path down into the glade, but Emma always had trouble finding it. The path saved walking through a lot of long grass and broken ground. She walked along the edge of the glade, trying to find the top end of the path. Dean was staring over the glade and into the distance.

“How far does your property go ?” He asked.

She pointed past the glade and at a line of trees in the distance.

“Those trees are there to hide the road that goes through Woodstock and then on to Oxford.” She said. “The trees mark the edge of the Glade Hall estate.”

“Look.” She added. “You can just see a bus going past.”

“What does your Dad do exactly ?” He asked. “He must be making a fortune.”

He wasn’t being rude, she knew his ways. Dean just talked and sometimes he said things before thinking about whether they were polite. She spotted the dead grass that marked the top of the path and began to walk down into the glade. She gave the answer he’d told her when she was about three and half.

“A lady asked me what you do Daddy.”

“Tell anyone who asks that I’m something in the City.”

Her father seemed well respected and there had never been any police hammering on their door, so she assumed his work was probably something legal and boring. Banking, Hedge fund management, or something like that. Even at nineteen she really had no idea how her father made his money.

“He’s something in the City.” She told Dean.

He laughed and lost concentration, almost going down a steep part of the path on his backside.

“Now you can see why I don’t come here in the dark.” She said.

“Seriously Emma ! Something in the City. Is he a mafia don or something ? You can tell me I’d be cool about it and never tell anyone.”

She picked up a stone and threw it at him, hitting him on the leg. It was more by luck than skill and Dean hopped about on one leg for a few seconds, milking it for all it was worth.

“Ok, ok Emma Corleone, something in the City it is.”

She laughed as they came out of the yew trees and onto the perfectly trimmed grass oval. The two standing stones looked rough, not trimmed and smooth like Stonehenge.

“Who keeps the grass so nice ?” He asked.

“No one knows, it’s always like this.”

She saw him go from 21st Century city dweller to medieval peasant in about two seconds.

“Really !?” He exclaimed, scanning the woods like a scared rabbit.

“You’re so gullible Dean. The gardeners cut the grass and tidy up. It’s all part of our estate.”

“Yeah, I knew that really.”

“Hmmmmm.”

None of the gardeners would enter the glade unless it was a bright day, but she didn’t tell him that. It was a bright day and still a couple of hours until dusk. Emma touched the largest stone and felt nothing. She really wanted to feel some kind of connection with the glade. After all, her family did now own the land. Nothing though, no matter how hard she tried to open herself up to whatever spirits lurked nearby. Dean’s hand was next to hers on the stone.

“What’s supposed to happen ?” He asked.

She looked up at the branches, going over their heads and blocking out some of the light. It was like being in some kind of cage and she could see why the gardeners only came on bright mornings.

“Nothing.” She answered.

The local stories were filling her mind, she had to tell him of the blood and death that made the glade a place to be shunned.

"They only answer to blood." She said. "A lot of blood has been sacrificed here, by a lot of people. Sometimes the blood wasn't their own."

"No, I'm not going to fall for it again."

She pointed at the base of a yew tree to the right of the smaller standing stone.

"An amateur archaeological dig found the bones of five infants buried near that tree." She said.

"Shallow graves, as though they'd been buried in a hurry."

He was looking serious now, realising she was no longer teasing him.

"There have been many others, it's all in the local papers and most of it can be found on the net, if you look for it."

"What sort of things?" He asked.

"Others trying to gain something." She answered. "Unrequited love, barren women, or just the usual wish to be wealthy. They've all come here and offered blood."

It seemed to be darker and the stone under her hand felt slightly warmer. Dean took his hand off the stone and searched his pockets, bringing out a tiny penknife. She'd seen the blade before, he'd used it to easily cut the tape on parcels.

"If it wants blood." He said.

He extended the tiny inch of sharp metal and placed it against his palm.

"What would you ask for?" She asked.

"You, forever. Pledge my undying love."

The stone felt so hot and it would have been so easy to let him go through with it. Harmless nonsense of course, she'd be able to tease him about the cut on his hand for weeks. It seemed so much darker though. She removed her hand from the stone and took the knife off him, closing the blade.

"No." She said. "That knife must be filthy, you'd get an infection."

"Yes, of course. Silly really."

"A nice sentiment though, thank you."

She gave him back the knife and the glade looked full of bright light again and the yew branches seemed high above her head again. All nonsense. They'd come back to glade, but only on really bright mornings.

"Come on." She said. "Cook is making a veggie lasagne for dinner and I'm starving."

"Me too." He said, following her up the path.

Emma looked back and just for a second, she saw a shadow next to the small standing stone.

"Are you ok?"

"Yes, just imagining things."

"We must come here again." He said.

"Oh yes, we'll come here again."

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