

Glade Hall

Chapter 20 – The Darkness

**“Hello darkness, my old friend,
I've come to talk with you again,
Because a vision softly creeping,
Left its seeds while I was sleeping,
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains.....”**

– Paul Simon

Σ

~Now~

It's been mentioned before that Nick Goodwood was now a believer. Was it belief if you'd seen unnatural acts and supernatural beings with your own eyes ? Surely that crossed the line between belief and knowing something to be a fact ? Nick wasn't into politics and the new trendy alternative facts. To him something was real or it wasn't, there was no middle ground. He stepped through the doorway and saw the flames pull back.

“I didn't imagine that.” He muttered. “It really happened.”

He knew the interior better than he knew the layout of his own home. Glade Hall had been the 'big contract,' the one that did more than just keep his business ticking over. Jerome Hooper's payments had kept his men paid and provided him with more than a little spare cash. From near bankruptcy to well thought of local builder. Now all that work was nothing but an inferno. He had the Hooper's money, even for the final few rooms that would now never be completed. It would have been so easy to walk away, to find another contract and move on. Maybe a holiday first, somewhere with a nice beach and a beachside bar.

“Oh Nick, you bloody fool !”

He was close to Sean's old work station, his heavy work jacket, gloves and helmet, still on hooks. Nick put them on and felt better protected against the heat. The heat was almost unbearable, which wasn't natural. He was in a small area of normality, surrounded by a sea of orange and yellow flames. The heat should have been frying his skin and igniting the hair on his head. There was nowhere to go though, until he heard the woman scream.

“Hello ! Who is that ?” He yelled.

No answer, he hadn't really expected one. The fire was bringing down some of the building's main beams, the noise was loud and fairly constant. There was movement in the flames though and a way through the flames he hadn't noticed. Nick still preferred to believe in logical explanations, until he saw the man dressed as a prehistoric hunter. The hunter was beckoning him into the flames.

“Who are you ? Do you know who was screaming ?”

The man dressed in skins spoke to him in a strange language, unlike anything he'd ever heard before. Much of it seemed to come from the back of the hunter's throat, more a controlled growl than language. He then nodded at Nick and pointed, straight into the flames. Only the flames didn't cover everything, there was a narrow gap across scorched floor boards and smouldering carpets.

“Crap ! I just hope you're on our side.”

Nick had no weapons and felt the need for something, anything he could use to defend himself. Sean's tools included a large claw hammer, which he picked up. He then followed the hunter, along narrow paths between the flames, always wondering if he was being led to his doom. Every corner looked to be a dead end, yet the hunter found another path that was just about open. Nick's skin blistered where the gloves didn't quite cover his wrists and he could smell his hair starting to singe. He ignored it all, following his new friend, whose name sounded like an opera singer, gargling. Nick had too much faith in the man who led him, not even bothering to watch the ground.

"Oh Christ ! Heh, hang on ! Wait !"

They'd been walking over a patch of unburnt linoleum and it was covered in something slippery. Oil maybe, but he couldn't be certain. Nick had slipped, his foot going right into the ferocious flames. To make matters worse it was his left foot, the leg he was already limping on. The hunter merely waited and watched, as Nick looked at his left ankle. The sock was some kind of man made material and it had melted, fusing with his skin. Agony wasn't a strong enough word, as he tried to separate himself from his sock. The hunter showed no sign of wandering off, but Nick though he needed to tell him something.

"I'll soon be on my feet. Just give me a minute."

Nick gave up trying to do anything about the burn on his ankle. If he survived, the doctors could sort it out. If he didn't survive, it wasn't anything to worry about. He stood and the skin on his ankle stretched.

"Oh Fuck !!"

The man dressed in skins showed no emotion or reaction to his outburst. The man looked like a hunter, he'd probably had to deal with injuries far worse than a burnt ankle. Nick took one step and the pain was dreadful, but just about tolerable.

"Ok, we're off again old friend."

He followed as the hunter led, always finding a way through the flames, just as it seemed they were surrounded by fire. Nick watched the ground for more oil, but they were soon walking on scorched wooden boards again. A whole section of wall fell down, barely ten feet from them. Nick put his hand over his face to avoid the sparks and debris, but his guide just carried on walking. Eventually they came to somewhere he'd recently seen Henry working and the area was free of flames.

"Down there ?" He asked.

The stairs that James Maynard had tried to obliterate, the only direct route to the second basement. The old stone stairs looked incomplete and precarious, especially for someone with an injured leg. The hunter grunted something at him and pointed down the stairs. He thought the man would carry on leading, but he just vanished. Nick held the claw hammer tightly in his right hand, as he carefully descended the stone stairs.

"Great ! On my own again."

Darkness, definitely not his best friend on an unknown and ill repaired staircase. He sat on the stairs, feeling with his feet and descending slowly and carefully. It seemed a long way to the basement, he worried they might have bricked up the opening. The stairs stopped and he was in complete darkness and feeling the walls. A door, with a large metal handle and it was unlocked. Nick opened the door a fraction and stopped, as he saw a chink of light and heard voices.

"Leave her alone, you abomination !"

It was Jerome Hooper's voice, but they were having a romantic weekend in Paris. Nick Goodwood swung the door wide and saw Jerry Hooper fighting with something that made his mind recoil. A tall woman, covered in burns, was holding Alice Hooper by the throat. Covered in burns didn't describe

it correctly, she was all burnt skin, every inch of her. Jerry was trying to fight the creature off and get her to drop his wife. There was no moral conflict for him in the situation, for a trained soldier his next course of action was both obvious and necessary. Nick held the hammer high and ran at the monster who was trying to strangle Alice Hooper.

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Emma Hooper had to try to move the timer herself. It wasn't that she didn't trust Leonard, she just needed to try. It had been knocked over at an awkward angle and would never work again. She was coughing as she gave up on the timer. The air was hot and full of the fumes from burning oil.

"Any ideas Leonard?" She asked.

He was shaking his head at her.

"If I had time to take it apart. Otherwise, no there's no way of exploding the charges."

Alex wasn't looking too good, she wanted to get him out the cellar, somewhere the wound in his stomach could be looked at. He didn't say anything at first, just putting his hand on her arm.

"I'll do it." He said. "Bo told us, even put a highlighted note in his instructions. If the timer is at zero, press the button and..... Boom!"

"Don't be crazy, you'll die." Said Leonard.

"I agree with him." Said Emma. "No crazy heroic gestures. Come on, I'll help you and we'll get up the stairs and out of this terrible place."

She was pulling at him, trying to get Alex to move, but he held back. He was removing his blood soaked hand from his stomach, pulling his shirt to one side.

"I didn't want to show you this, but there isn't time for a long argument. I'm going nowhere, doubt I'd make it to the top of the stairs."

Removing his hand didn't reveal coils of intestines, that probably only happened in movies. There was a hole in him though, a deep one that was bleeding profusely. Alex gasped in pain and as he moved, she saw deeper into the wound. No details, just something glistening and moving, internal organs that were never meant to be exposed to the outside world. At that moment, she realised that no matter what she did, Alex was going to die. Emma nodded at him.

"I'll get Leonard outside, I promise." She said.

He was gay and on the wrong side of middle age, but Emma kissed Alex on the lips, holding the kiss for a couple of seconds. It wasn't just for Alex, it was the goodbye she'd never had a chance to give Dean.

"No ! No ! This is crazy !" Yelled Leonard. "You're both insane !"

She grabbed hold of Leonard, ignoring his pleading. Emma had more strength, though no idea where it was coming from. Maybe out of fear, maybe given to her by some of the more benevolent ghosts. She held Leonard like a toddler having a tantrum and pulled him up the stairs.

"Once I see you get to the top of the stairs, I'll count to ten and flip the switch." Said Alex.

"Thank you."

Thank you, what an insignificant way to thank someone for sacrificing their life. Alex would know though, he'd understand. Leonard continued to struggle, even digging his finger nails into her arm. She ignored it all.

"Sorry Leonard, there was no other way."

Something had changed in Emma and not just the extra strength. Lydia was still fighting her battle with James Maynard and it was no longer a silent struggle. All the way up the stairs, she could see and hear Lydia and James screaming insults at each other. The children too, their young voices, screaming at the father who'd offered them as sacrifices to the darkness. Emma didn't think the

dead could bleed, yet the creature that had once been James Maynard, appeared to be bleeding. Lydia was winning; she's ripped lumps out of him, the children leaving long thick wounds on his legs. Given time Lydia would destroy James, but there wasn't going to be time. Soon Alex would explode the charges and destroy the altar.

"Thank you Lydia." Emma whispered.

Did Lydia look at her, was there a momentary eye contact ? Emma wasn't sure. Soon the unholy altar would be destroyed and for the children it would be a welcome release. They were innocents though, with nothing to fear. James and Lydia were probably going to end up in that place they all feared. Emma didn't think it was anything like the biblical view of hell, but it had to be somewhere extremely unpleasant. Every phantom in Glade Hall feared that place, even Hermione refused to talk about it. For James Maynard it would be a place of well-deserved punishment. As for Lydia ? She was a creature of darkness, who'd done some truly terrible things. Yet a small part of Emma, hoped that Lydia Maynard might find a little peace and redemption.

"Come on Leonard, just a few more steps."

She had to almost carry him through the dense smoke at the top of the stairs. The cellar door was still open, though it looked dark in the second basement. Emma went through the door and turned to her right, letting Leonard fall to the floor. She leant over him, covering him with her body. What had Alex said ? A Count of ten, but did he mean ten seconds or a quick count ?

"Christ Dad, what are you doing here ?"

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Hermione didn't need sleep the way she'd needed it as a human. At the rare times she'd felt fatigue, spreading herself through the fabric of Glade Hall had restored her. Sometimes it had been decades until something had pulled her back again, but she never slept. She'd watched Jerry all night, pleased that his sleep seemed to be deep and untroubled. Now the boy seemed troubled, thrashing about in his sleep. Maybe a nightmare ? It was still a long way from dawn, when he woke and sat on the side of the bed.

"Don't be scared." She said. "I won't let anything hurt you."

Nonsense of course, there were at least a dozen or more phantoms at Glade Hall, who could easily brush her aside and kill the child. It was what adults said to children though. It was the same as telling children that there were no real monsters, when the world was full of them.

"Mione !"

He knew her, they had met several times since he'd come to live in Glade Hall. Hermione wasn't feeling that strong, the fire was sapping her strength, in the same way that it hurt the other ghosts and creatures of darkness. Using all her remaining strength, she became corporeal enough to hug Jerry Jr. Something inside her was delighted, when he hugged her back.

"Are you alright Jerry ? Do you need anything ?"

"Just need to pee."

"Ahh, then I'd better look the other way for a while."

Hermione heard him pee into the metal bucket, trying not to react to the sound. She felt different, like a piece of elastic pulled out too far. Would she spring back or break ?

"You can look now."

Jerry was back in bed, smoothing out his own bedding, looking nervously around the old stables building. Hermione held his hand.

"I won't leave you Jerry. I'll wait until Emma arrives in the morning."

"Promise."

Hermione had once cursed fate for allowing her a seemingly endless existence, without being able to look forward to doing the things normal girls her age did. Most women born in her era didn't aspire to a career, but she had wanted a husband, a home to make her own and children. The anger had gone, but Hermione had kept a little of her maternal instinct.

"I promise." She said, crossing herself. "Cross my heart and hope to die, if I break it."

"Silly."

He chuckled and leant back on his pillow, quickly going back to sleep. Hermione knew something was happening at Glade Hall and it might mean her being released from the hold The Glade held over her. She was unsure how she felt about that, but she'd look after Jerry while she waited. She pulled in her remaining strength, becoming little more than a slight green glow, sat on the end of the bed. Her ethereal presence would be enough to reassure the child, if he woke again before dawn.

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Emma was leaning over Leonard as she looked up. It was like one of those tableaux you see in waxworks, a piece of action frozen in time. At the other end of the basement, her parents and Nick Goodwood were involved in a battle with Eloise and her sisters, Maude and Rose. The only proper light was from her dad's smartphone, which he held in his left hand. In his right he had part of a broken bedframe, which he was using to hit Eloise.

"Mum !" She yelled.

Her mother was on the ground, but moving a little, she wasn't dead. Maude and Rose were actually keeping back and whimpering. Obviously they were aware that the destruction of Glade Hall, might mean the end of their ghostly existence. Eloise still looked strong and angry, holding Nick Goodwood up by his throat. Nick was dead, Emma knew it for a certainty. The angle of his head, the general way his body looked like a rag doll. Nick wasn't unconscious, he was dead and might have been dead for a while. Emma stood and walked towards the dead witch.

"Eloise !" She yelled.

How many monsters did Glade Hall have waiting for her and why hadn't Alex detonated the explosives yet ? Eloise dropped Nick and turned towards her.

"You ! This is all your doing !" She yelled.

The witch began moving her hands in a ritualistic pattern, while intoning a spell in Latin. Luckily Alex pressed the switch, before Eloise had a chance to use the spell. The detonation in the cellar changed everything, time itself seemed to alter for a while. To Emma it was all in slow motion, as Rose vanished and then Maude. Eloise hung on longer, probably through willpower alone.

"Think you've won Emma ? No one ever really wins against....."

She didn't just vanish, it was more of a gradual disintegration. The burnt skin turned a light red colour, almost like rust. Eloise never screamed or complained, as she became just a pile of light red dust. Her nemesis, the one she feared the most, even more than James. Gone, become nothing but dust in less than a minute. No time to relax though, smoke was beginning to fill the basement.

"Come on Leonard, time to leave."

He was crying now and docile, as she led him towards her parents. Her mother was up on her knees, her father using part of his shirt to cover a wound on her mum's shoulder.

"Emma, thank God." Said her mum. "Nick saved us. If he hadn't arrived when he did, keeping that thing busy....."

"What is going on Emma ?" Asked her father. "The things we've seen tonight....."

"Later dad, much later. Mum needs to get to hospital. Can you look after Leonard ?"

"But why Emma, why burn our home ?"

Emma had often been angry with her dad. This was the first time she'd actually shouted at him.

"Dad !!" She yelled. "We can talk about it later. We need to leave, now!"

Her dad went to help Leonard, who put up no resistance to being led out of the basement. Emma had the strength to pick her mother up, carrying her in her arms, the way Dean had once carried Jerry Jr.

"It's ok now isn't Emma ?" Asked her mum. "I feel it, they're gone now."

"Yes mum, it's fine now. Everything is going to be fine."

It was a lie; there was one more thing to be done, probably the hardest part of the entire plan.

Emma led, carrying her mother. It would have been nice to have at least tidied Nick's clothes a little, maybe straightened out his broken limbs. There wasn't time though; soon the basement would be engulfed in flames. It would be Nick's funeral pyre and perhaps that was appropriate for a fallen warrior. Emma took the route she knew, up through the first basement and then into the kitchen. Everything was alight and the few places that weren't an inferno, were covered in slippery heating oil. Her father was just behind her, helping Leonard.

"Follow me." She said. "Don't run and don't stop. You mustn't stop !"

Leonard was still ignoring everything, still in deep shock. Her father looked alert though, nodding at her.

"It's going to be hot, but keep following me." She said.

James and Lydia Maynard had gone, she felt it and knew she'd absorbed a great deal of their power. That had been part of the deal she's agreed. Emma's memories had returned with the destruction of the altar, she knew what had to be done. A few words in a long dead language, perfectly articulated and the flames moved back, leaving a safe passage to the outside. Not enough, the heat would still be too intense. It was almost as if the flames were living beings, refusing to give up their victims without a fight.

"Obey me !"

She used another spell from a world long gone and the flames gave her a wider corridor. The whole building shuddered, as a chimney stack fell, its heavy brickwork collapsing much of the oldest part of the house. They had to move, but move carefully. One last look at her father, hoping it wouldn't be the last.

"Ready ?"

"Yes."

Emma Hooper used something beyond simple spells. Her willpower kept the flames back and much of the blistering heat. She walked slowly, feeling her trainers slipping about on the oil she'd deliberately spread over the floor. Back then she'd planned for all four of them to escape and her parents were supposed to have been in Paris. There had been no part of the plan that included her carrying her mother across the oil covered boards.

"Keep up ! Ignore the heat, not far now." She yelled.

The edges of her mum's top were beginning to smoulder, but she ignored everything, putting one foot carefully in front of the other. Finally they were out in the open air, yet the heat remained with them, as Emma carried on across the car park. Everything seemed to be burning, including the stacks of seasoned timber used by Henry. Emma only paused, when the heat on her back felt tolerable. Her father was still there, coaxing Leonard to carry on walking.

"Where is your car ?" She asked.

"I'll show you, but then I'm going to want some answers !"

Leonard turned around and looked at Glade Hall, as it collapsed in on itself. It was the first thing he'd taken an interest in since Alex had died. He briefly looked at Emma, before running off towards the nearest trees. Her father began to run after him.

"No dad ! He just wants to be alone, to grieve. And you need to get mum to the hospital in Oxford."

"But it's not safe for him Emma."

"It is dad, now it is safe here. Leonard will come to no harm from a night in the woods. Not now."

Alice was fully awake when Emma put her in the back of her parent's hire car. The makeshift bandage had shifted about and fresh blood had run down her arm. Emma wasn't an expert on such things, but the blood loss didn't look life threatening.

"Emma ! See, I knew we needed to come and save you."

"Yes mum, you arrived just in time. Now dad is going to drive you to the hospital."

Her mother drifted into a half asleep again, perhaps from minor concussion. Emma closed the car door, expecting her father to get in the car.

"Our house burned down, you acting strange !" He said. "I've had enough Emma. I want an explanation and you can get in the car with your mother and start talking."

It was as though Glade Hall had saved up yet another obstacle to put in her path. Her father was holding the car door open, determined she was going with them to the hospital.

"No dad, I have to go to Jerry, he'll be waking up soon."

Her mother became suddenly alert after hearing her mention her brother.

"Jerry Jr ! You brought him into this Emma !"

"I sort of assumed that..... Well that you'd left him with someone." Added her dad.

The looks on their faces, she was the family villain again. They'd forgotten her saving them both from the inferno. Mind you, she had to admit to herself that the inferno had been her creation. It was all meant for the right reasons, there just wasn't time to explain.

"I have to go to Jerry." She said.

Her father tried to grab her, but she was too quick. She heard him yelling questions at her, as she ran towards the farm and the old stables.

"No Emma, I forbid it ! Come back !"

Was her new vision part of the deal ? Emma still found it hard to remember every detail of her agreement with them, or it. The night no longer slowed her down, she ran at full speed, seeing every dip in the ground, every hole waiting to break a careless ankle. It was as though the texture of the world had changed, into something she could read in complete darkness.

"Be ok Jerry, please be ok."

She ignored her father's calls, only stopping when she reached the treeline. She saw their car, heading down the driveway. There were blue lights in the distance now, but no sound of sirens yet. The emergency services were arriving. It was too late though, Glade Hall was too much of an inferno to be saved.

"It looks like hell." She muttered.

The flames in the tunnels had found a way out, reaching high up into the air, in the direction of the grotto. Emma turned and saw more flames, rising above The Glade. The yew trees were burning though they wouldn't die. She now had all of the knowledge of Eloise in her head, or at least most of it. Emma knew that yew trees weren't really of this world and they were hard to kill. Some roots would survive and all it took was a few roots. It might take one or two centuries, but The Glade would regrow. That fire hadn't been part of the agreement, but burning The Glade gave her more... what was that word her dad loved to use ? Leverage, yes, it gave her more leverage. Those weren't

the only parts of the estate, lit up by fire. The tunnels went everywhere and erosion had created holes and in some places, a complete collapse. Every tiny gap, every hole that gave access to the air, had been used by the flames. She was surrounded by dozens of tiny fires, perhaps thousands. Some fairly close, others down by the road to Oxford. It was summer and much of the undergrowth was as dry as kindling. The inferno would spread, perhaps reaching as far as the farm.

“Jerry !”

Emma Hooper ran into the darkness, pleased that there were no fires in front of her.

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The stables looked undisturbed, though there was now the faint sound of sirens in the distance. Soon the fire brigade would be investigating, realising the fire was no accident. For the first time, Emma wondered about her future. Arson was a serious crime and they’d find human remains amongst the ruins of Glade Hall. Would she be charged with murder ? Once she’d have been an emotional wreck, just thinking of the likely consequences. Now she was far stronger, the legal implications forgotten in an instant.

“No problem is insurmountable, once you have money and power.” She muttered.

Not that she was thinking of the illusory power of politicians, the kind that evaporated with one bad election result. She meant real power, the permanent kind, the kind they could give her. No using a key, she put her hand on the padlock, watching it crumble to dust. Was that trick taken from Lydia or Eloise ? She wasn’t certain and it didn’t really matter. James Maynard had unwillingly given her the most power and he’d frowned on such exhibitionism.

“You’re still here.”

Hermione, still sat on the end of the bed, keeping her promise to watch over her little brother. The ghost became a brighter shade of green, standing, putting her hands out to be held. Emma clasped the barely corporeal fingers, giving Hermione a little of the power taken from Eloise.

“At one point.” Said Hermione. “I thought I was going, it must have been when you destroyed the ancient altar. I remained though, even if as just an aura.”

Emma hugged the now more substantial form of Hermione and looked over her shoulder at her sleeping brother.

“Did he wake ?”

“Only once to use the bucket.”

“Was he scared.”

“A little, but I soothed him.”

He looked so peaceful, his sleeping head resting snugly on the pillow. Emma hated to wake him, but there was no option.

“You can go now, if you want to.” She said to Hermione. “Anything holding you here is now gone, destroyed with the house.”

Emma stopped hugging the ghost, standing back to get a better look at Hermione. A little extra power and she was a fairly normal looking seventeen year old girl again, in her best party dress. There was a green aura around her, but she looked almost, but not quite, alive.

“If you stay, it has to be of your own free will.” Said Emma. “I’d like you to stay though.”

Hermione looked around, felt her own arm and then Emma’s. She even picked up one of Jerry’s chocolate bars, throwing it across the room.

“If I stay, will I always be like this, able to move things, make sounds ? I need to exist Emma, even if only a little bit.”

"I promise Hermione. While I draw breath you will exist and I intend to be breathing for a great number of years."

"Then I will stay."

"Good, now I need to wake Jerry."

Emma knelt next to the bed and blew gently on his face. Gradually his eyes opened and he began to smile at her. His hand went out to be held and Emma had to pull him towards her, hugging him until he fidgeted about.

"Too tight Emma."

"Sorry, did you miss me?"

"Yes, love Emma. I was scared, but Mione came."

She sat him on the edge of the bed and fetched the bag with his clean clothes. There were wet wipes in with some of his bag of drinks and she used those to clean his face and hands.

"I can dress myself now."

"Yes, but you know why I'm doing it don't you?"

"I mess about and it takes forever."

He was grinning at her, as she removed his dirty clothes and dressed him in a nice clean shirt and shorts.

"Aww he's adorable!" Said Hermione.

"Sometimes, usually when bribed with cookies."

"Cookies!" Yelled Jerry.

He was hungry and thirsty. Would the emergency services come to the stables? Would the police be looking for her? Her brother needed time to eat something and drink. Emma sat on the floor, patiently watching him eat two chocolate bars.

"Ok Jerry, we need to go somewhere now." She said. "I know it's been a frightening night, but this is the last thing we have to do. Then it will all be over."

"Need to pee."

It meant another delay and more wet wipes. Eventually she picked him up and he felt much lighter. It wasn't him of course, it was her, the extra strength she still had to get used to. Dean should have been there too of course, helping her carry Jerry. No time to cry for Dean though, that would come later and probably go on for days. There was Tommy Milner too, awaiting trial for a murder he hadn't committed. That problem too, could wait for a while. Emma collected up her brother's things, putting them into a bag. Hermione couldn't carry anything, so it was something else for her to carry. She added a few uneaten chocolate bars to the contents of her pockets, after using them as a bribe.

"Be good and they're yours."

She needn't have worried, he was asleep within a few seconds of leaving the stable, his head against her shoulder. They must have looked a strange trio, if anyone had been around to see them. A young girl covered in soot and ash, carrying a sleeping boy child. Behind them came the ghostly green apparition, the dead phantom of a young girl. Hermione hesitated to follow her, as they reached the path into The Glade. The trees were burning, black smoke hung over the place. Emma knew it wasn't the fire that worried Hermione.

"You can wait for me here if you want. You know what I must do."

"No, I said I'd stay with you and I will."

Jerry didn't wake, as Emma followed the path, with the occasional detour to avoid a burning tree.

The fires stopped well before the oval of well-kept grass. The old gods still had power, even after the

destruction of their most powerful minions. The smoke hung over the standing stones, but the trees circling the centre of The Glade, still flourished.

“You need to wake up now Jerry.”

Emma Hooper put her foot on the grass, just as her little brother opened his eyes. Her path was set now, no turning back. Teasing the darkness brought swift and painful death. She thought Hermione might remain among the trees, but the ghost followed her across the grass. Emma stopped in front of the largest standing stone, still carrying her brother.

“It is done.” She said. “I am here to honour our agreement.”

There were just two of them now, all the shadows were gone. Too many shadows, all of them needing to feed on whatever was offered as a sacrifice. Too many ghosts that were barely touched by darkness, yet grabbed their piece of an ever diminishing pie. The Glade had been too good at attracting the dark spirits too itself. The result was a common phenomenon, over population. Even James Maynard hadn't wandered far from home in decades. The spirits had become jaded, the darkness surrounded by impotent servants. Something needed to change and Emma Hooper was that change.

“You have damaged what we wished saved, killed those we wanted spared. You went beyond what was agreed.”

They were amongst the trees, hiding in the night. Outlines that gave little idea of their form, but hinted at something dreadful. Always the eyes though, the eyes as red as hot coals. They were still immensely powerful, but now alone. They needed her, that gave her lots of leverage.

“I wasn't alone in going further than was agreed. Eloise knew of my plans and Dean Jenkins should have been with me now, stood by my side.”

No accusing them of betrayal, that would be reckless. They had decided to hedge their bets and see who finally won. Either way, Emma would have thinned the herd out for them. Only now there was no herd, only her.

“I come as agreed, to offer myself as your loyal servant.”

There was no reply, or one expected. Emma would offer them her blood and it would be either accepted or rejected. Rejection would mean pain, quite a lot of pain for quite a long period of time. She had leverage, but they were angry.

“I need to put you down Jerry. Stay by me and don't wander off. Ok ?”

“I won't. Don't like it here.”

Neither did she at that moment. Emma had the hunting knife on her belt, but simply ran her palm over the rough edge of the stone. It was what thousands of others had done, over the course of many centuries. She placed her palm on the stone, letting her blood run down it, right to the grass below. Now came the moment, it all hung on them accepting her.

“Thank you. I will serve you faithfully for as long as I live and beyond.”

The stone was glowing bright yellow, they had accepted her. Emma saw the agreement as flexible though. She'd be faithful to them as long as her wishes aligned with theirs.

“The child now ! It was agreed, we need his blood.”

Hermione flinched slightly, odd thing for a ghost to do, especially as she knew Emma's plan. The ghost remained though, keeping her word and keeping silent.

“Lean back Jerry, let me see you.”

He leant into her, his face looking up at her. Emma put her left hand in his shoulder and used her right to pull the hunters knife free of her belt. It was going to be so easy ! His blood, the blood of a true innocent and her blood relative. They'd trust her after that and leave her in peace for decades.

“Cookie ! Cookie Emma.”

“Later and all the chocolate you can eat.”

He looked so trusting, his face smiling up at her, his neck at just the right angle. There would be little pain, as the knife went in deep, cutting several major arteries. Emma held the knife up and decided to see how far her leverage could be pushed.

“No !” She shouted. “You get me forever, but my brother lives.”

“We need his blood. Blood is everything, blood is all !”

“And I will offer you blood, plenty of blood. Not his though, my brother isn’t going to die by my hand.”

She grabbed his tiny hand, making him try to pull back.

“Just a little hurt on one finger Jerry.”

“Ok.”

There had to be enough blood for her purpose. She cut across the top of his index finger, making him cry out.

“Be brave Jerry, bravest you can be. Put your finger on the stone, let your blood run over it.”

“Scared Emma.”

“Only brave boys get chocolate.”

She knelt next to him, tickling him slightly to get him chuckling. Emma helped him put his finger on the cleanest part of the stone. Not a huge amount of blood, but hopefully enough.

“This is my brother Jerry.” She said. “Taste his blood, so that you might know him. I humbly ask you to protect him as he grows up to be a man.”

They moved closer, those old Gods of darkness. Was she about to die and her brother ? Gods tended to be unpredictable, even appearing illogical to mortal men, or women.

“This is not as agreed !”

Their anger rumbled through The Glade, yet she was all they had left. She had a good hand, so good she was willing to risk everything on it.

“I ask again, please take my brother under your protection.”

The promised sacrifice hadn’t even become another acolyte. If Jerry wanted to serve them, she wouldn’t discourage him, but that had to be of his own free will. He had to be a grown man, fully aware of the consequences. Emma didn’t need to hear the reply, the stone was glowing pure white. They liked her brother’s blood and blood was everything, blood was all to the ancient Gods of darkness.

“Yes, we will protect him.”

Emma Hooper smiled down at her brother and thought of the future. There was so much she wanted to do and she would soon have omnipotence at her command and eternity at her disposal.

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~The End~

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<http://www.menderastorm.com/> For Glade Hall and my other books and short stories.