

## Echoes

### Echoes 2 – 42 Back

**“The second short story in the ongoing tales of Emma Hooper and her life after the destruction of Glade Hall. A seasonal visit to New York, as Christmas approaches. A task to sort out a few problems for a friend, which turns into much more.....”**

**Word count 15,020, and as always, there’s a PDF version in the download area.**

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~ Then ~

~ Three Years Previously ~

Alice Hooper dialled the New York number as soon as they were in their suite, leaving him to try and make sense out of just one side of the conversation.

“Ginie, sorry the useless hotel people lost your message or something.”

He saw Alice’s face change, saw panic begin to form in her eyes.

“I had the same feeling this morning. Are you sure ?”

The phone wasn’t cordless, she was trying to drag the phone across the room to the drawer that held their passports.

“We’ll be getting the next flight to London Ginie. I’ll call you as soon as we get home.”

Jerry Hooper’s wife was actually crying and he had no idea why. No use asking, he knew from past experience, that she’d ignore him until the call ended. There was nothing rude or callous about it, just the way his wife handled stressful phone calls.

“Yes, I hope it’s nothing too. Thank you for calling Ginie.”

The call ended and Alice was looking at him, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“I heard that we’re going home.” He said.

There was a complimentary box of tissues next to the fruit bowl. He handed them to her and waited for his wife to tell him about the call.

“Ginie had a bad feeling about Glade Hall last night.” She said. “Then she dreamt of fire Jerry, the whole house burning down !”

Alice gripped his arm, so hard that it made him wince.

“She saw Emma running from the flames Jerry !”

He knew when he was beaten and besides, he’d had his own worries about leaving the house that weekend.

“You pack our things.” He said. “I’ll go to reception and explain that we have a family emergency. I’ll ask them to arrange a taxi to Charles de Gaulle Airport. We’ll get on the next available plane back to London.”

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~ Now ~

Emma Hooper had some incredible abilities and more occult knowledge than a whole roomful of witches, but even she had to rely on jet aircraft to get from London to New York. Just ten days before Christmas, the journey had been hell, and the air fares ridiculously expensive. A taxi from John F Kennedy International Airport, which she’d asked to drop her off, quite a distance from where her smartphone was pointing at the Maynard residence. A small case on wheels trundling behind

her, Emma wanted to see the street as her mother had described it to her. Angela Maynard was the last of the Maynards now and she'd sworn never to have children.

"The curse has to end with me."

Known as Ginie to her friends, she'd attended the meeting when Emma had been given her settlement from the trust fund and told she was no longer welcome in the Hooper household. Ginie had given her the stink eye, but there had been none of the verbal beating her parents had given her. When Emma had received the email inviting her to New York, she'd hoped it meant Ginie might think of her as a friend. Like her mother had done several years previously, Emma stopped on the pavement across the street and looked at Angela Maynard's New York home. Being close to Christmas there were quite a few flashing lights and fake Christmas trees in nearby shop windows.

"The house looks out of place, but not that out of place." She muttered.

It wasn't the best part of New York, most of the houses in the street had been converted into small apartments. There was a coffee place next to the building she was looking for, her smartphone was pointing right at it. It was still one dwelling, a four storey town house, quite a rarity in modern New York. Not that Ginie was cash rich these days, that was part of the reason for Emma being there. She crossed the street and banged her case up the few steps to the door. The door opened about five seconds after she'd rung the bell.

"Hello, I'm expected." Said Emma. "My name is Emma Hooper."

"Yes, all the way from London.....Come in. You may call me Ella."

"Thank you Ella, please call me Emma."

A young girl with Hispanic looks. Ella might have been anywhere from twenty five to thirty five, Emma was useless at guessing ages. There had been two servants when her mother had visited, but both had died in subsequent accidents. There had been a lot of deaths from strange and inexplicable accidents, including the fire that had killed the very frail and elderly Nathaniel James Maynard.

"Did you have a good flight?" Asked Ella.

"The airport was a bit crushed, being so close to Christmas. The flight home is likely to be worse though."

Her mother had mentioned a black girl called Monique, who'd taken a bit of a shine to her brother Jerry Jr. It was tempting to ask about her, but she was probably dead, killed by whatever had cursed the house at that time. Ella took her along a short corridor and into a bright and airy room at the front of the house. Through the net curtained windows, she could see the tinsel and flashing lights in a nearby dress shop.

"Emma, so pleased you could come to New York." Said Ginie. "I tend to receive visitors in here during the winter; the room gets the best of the afternoon sunshine. I saw you walking down the street."

"Yes, I decided to walk and let the cab go at the top of the street.....Picking up a bit of atmosphere."

"Ella was just about to bring coffee. Or I think we have tea, if you'd prefer?"

"I know it sounds childish, but my mother mentioned the wonderful homemade lemonade that came in a jug." Said Emma. "For some reason it's been on my mind since I got off the plane."

The way they looked at each other. Emma could guess what the response was going to be, before it was spoken.

"I'm afraid it was Monique who made the lemonade." Said Ginie. "To a secret family recipe I believe, taught to her by her mother. Sadly Monique..... You must have heard?"

"Yes, my parents told me. Coffee is fine."

It had been her fault, yet Emma had never felt any guilt over events in New York. There had been so much to worry about at Glade Hall, especially the death of her boyfriend Dean. With so many dreadful things to feel guilty about, she'd run out of emotional space to deal with events the other side of the Atlantic.

"Oh, I'm not being a good host....I seldom get the chance to practise my skills anymore. Sit Emma, please make yourself at home." Said Ginie. "Ella will take your bag, I've put you in a room at the front on the first floor."

"Thank you, my mother always said how beautiful your home is."

"Alas it isn't what it was, but we try."

Ella left with her bag and Emma was left alone with the last surviving Maynard, a woman she hardly knew. Emma had destroyed the evil that had taken possession of Glade Hall, her family's home. In doing so she'd unleashed some kind of vengeance in New York. Maybe the ghosts of long dead Maynards, or the cruelty of the old Gods of the Glade ? Everyone in Ginie's house had died that night, apart from Ginie. She hadn't escaped unharmed. Angela Maynard always wore her hair longer on the right side of her face and Emma knew why.

"Could I see ?" Said Emma. "Your face I mean.....Rude I know, but I feel responsible."

"You couldn't have known, and if you had.....You still did the right thing Emma. I think your parents should have understood too. That dreadful house needed to be burned down to the ground. They should have salted the ground afterwards."

Ginie pulled her hair up and try as she might to hold it back, Emma gasped. It looked as though something had ripped at the poor woman's face. No wonder the haunted look in Ginie's eyes, made her look older than her forty five years. Jagged line, after jagged line.....Emma had to look away.

"Ginie.....I'm so sorry. Can't something be done ?"

When she looked back Ginie had pushed her hair back over the terrible injuries, but the look of pain and suffering was still in her eyes.

"Surgery you mean ? What you saw is after a dozen attempts over the last three years. It seems the Gods of the Glade haven't finished punishing me. No matter how skilled the surgeon, their work is always reversed and often I end up looking worse."

Emma hadn't even told her parents, though she thought they must have guessed. Ginie had invited her into her home though, which meant she was owed some honesty. Besides, Emma had the distinct feeling she'd been invited to New York because of her expertise in occult matters.

"I need to tell you something." She said. "If you want me to leave your home, I will understand. I serve the old Gods of the Glade. I could lie and say it was just to make sure my little brother was safe.....But.....It was really about gaining the power the old Gods could give me."

Ginie was actually smiling at her, which was unexpected.

"But you did destroy the evil which had taken root in Glade Hall ?" Ginie asked.

"Yes, I did."

Nothing wrong with her hearing at any rate. Ginie patted the back of her hand and waited for Ella to enter the room and leave again, after serving their coffee. Before she began talking again.

"I'd be a hypocrite to be angry Emma, my family served the deities in the Glade for centuries. In fact, our entire family fortune was based on that relationship. I brought you here to talk about one problem I'm having selling some property, here in New York. Now we've met and talked.....There are two other matters. Do you think you could heal my face ?"

"May I touch the scars ?"

"Yes, of course."

Easier to look at the dreadful wounds for a second time. She was now looking in the role of healer, rather than the guilty party in causing the pain and suffering. Emma ran her fingers over the scars and felt resistance, almost like being warned off. There would be a price for giving Ginie her face back, but as Emma knew....Everything came with a price.

“No promises, but maybe.....I’ll need to talk to a few friends, dead friends. Ideally I’d summon them to the room you’re letting me use in your home. If you’d prefer, I can use a local hotel room ?”

“I wouldn’t hear of it, you have my permission to summon whatever you like. As long as you can get rid of whatever you call up of course.....Anyway.....We have more than our fair share of haunting spirits already.”

“That must be the other problem you wanted to talk about ?”

“Yes, but drink your coffee.....And I see Ella has baked some of her famous cookies.”

The cookies were good, as was the coffee. Emma settled back and let Ginie tell the story in her own way, at her own pace.

“Something was left behind in this house after you cleansed Glade Hall, I’m certain of it. If you can get rid of it, that would be fantastic, or just give me a name for what haunts the top floor of my home. A poltergeist, a ghost, an evil spirit.....Whatever it is ? I think it must be harmless, it hasn’t hurt anyone, so far. The poor man who gets rid of the mice though..... He was terrified.”

“Start with him Ginie, why was he terrified.” Asked Emma.

“Oh, I really need to tell you about the start of things, when the cleaners refused to go up to the top floor. There is only Ella and I these days, so I hired a commercial cleaning service. The same sort of people who look after office blocks, but will also clean large homes. I heard whispers from one or two of the girls they sent in, stories about voices while they worked, even shapes that walked through walls. In the end their supervisor told me none of his people would clean the fourth floor.”

“Have you seen anything ?” Asked Emma.

“Not seen, no. just heard sounds that have stopped me going up there. Ella refuses to go above the third floor, so it was left to become covered in dust and dirt. Which brings me onto poor Duncan.”

“Poor Duncan ? Who is Duncan.”

“Every big old house has mice, I’ve never denied it. Duncan was the man from the rodent control company I hired. Actually they do all sorts of infestation removal, but mice have always been the problem here. I told him only to do the first three floors. Duncan was a perfectionist though and kept putting his little boxes of poison, all over the top floor. Until the afternoon I heard him scream.” It had ceased to be just a briefing for a favour, Emma was hooked on Ginie’s anecdote.

“Why did he scream ?”

“I’ve no idea, he just ran out of the house and never came back. I called his company and they sent me a new man to take care of the mice. He never goes up to the fourth floor, ever. I’d like to know what Duncan saw or heard, but.....I’ll probably never know. Will you go up there for me Emma ? Someone with your skills must be safe. Just look around up there for me. Then over dinner tonight, we can talk about Saul Pacca, the real reason I asked you to come to New York. You’ll enjoy dinner, Ella is a fantastic cook.”

“HmMMM sing for my supper eh ?”

“No, of course not..... If you prefer not to, just enjoy a little Christmas shopping in New York.”

“Once I’ve unpacked I’ll visit the top floor Ginie. To be honest.....I’m really curious now.”

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Emma had briefly looked in a few shop windows close by, and then there had been coffee and nibbles with Ella in the kitchen at the back of the house. Getting to know Ella was essential, if she wanted to pick up the atmosphere and recent history of Ginie's house.

"I know this place has a sad history, but that's in the past." Ella had told her.

"Apart from whatever lurks on the fourth floor."

Ella had nodded at her and the mood in the kitchen became cooler, darker.

"Yes Emma, but as my mother always told me; what can't be changed, must be endured."

No use asking Ella to show her the top floor and Ginie certainly wasn't going to venture past the third floor of her own home. December in New York meant afternoons when it was dark just after four. There was still a glow coming through the windows as Emma headed up the stairs, but it wouldn't last for long. Tempting to summon Hermione to be her eyes and ears in the spirit world, but for the moment, she just wanted to explore the infamous top floor.

"First floor." She muttered. "I hope this floor is alright, as I'm sleeping in one of the rooms tonight."

The first reconnoitre of the house had to be thorough, even if she had no intention of trying to get rid of anything unnatural she might find, or get into a fight. Emma stood about halfway down the hallway, just outside Ginie's bedroom. She stood quite still and let her senses wander a little.

"Nothing.....Apart from something, at the top of the house."

Was there an attic? She hadn't asked and her mother had never mentioned one, but there had to be one. The age and size of the house.....

"There has to be an attic." She muttered.

"An attic.....Yes, there's an attic.....Use the elevator."

A disembodied voice seemed to move down the hallway, talking to her in a vaguely feminine voice.

"Who are you?....."

Nothing, apart from a slight rustling sound to her left. Alice Hooper, her mother, had mentioned a rattily old elevator she'd used to get to the top floor. That had been when a very paranoid eighty eight year old Nathaniel James Maynard had lived on the top floor. The last male Maynard, he'd been right to be paranoid. After telling her mother a few unwise secrets, he'd been immolated in his own bed. In his day the staircase had been blocked and the only way to the top floor, was by the rather old and noisy elevator. Emma found the elevator behind a curtain at the end of the hall. A fairly modern addition to the house, the shaft must have been built over part of the back garden. She made sure the gate and doors were closed, before pushing the call button.

"Friend or foe.....Helping me, or sending me hurtling to my doom in this dreadful contraption?"

Ginie hadn't mentioned the elevator and it was unlikely to have been service or checked over in years. It arrived from above and stopped about three inches past the floor, before coming slowly back up again, which was far from encouraging. She opened the gate and the doors and stepped inside. The elevator wobbled around a little, but Emma was determined not to get paranoid about a rattily elevator.

"What can't be changed.....Yada Yada.....As Ella's mum says." She mumbled.

Once the doors were closed it was quite a small space inside. Emma remembered her mother mentioning the elevator had been installed, so that Nathaniel James Maynard could be taken down to the garden in his wheelchair. Emma was still determined to be thorough, she pressed the button for the second floor. After a strange wheezing sound, the contraption went up, depositing her at the next floor up.

"HmMMM..... This floor looks well used." She muttered.

The last sunlight of the day, was still valiantly trying to create a cheerful glow on the hall window. Emma found a bank of six switches and the hallway was full of light. Flowers on a hall table, and even if they were plastic, they'd been dusted. Signs of cleaning that hadn't quite reached a few areas, or the tops of skirting boards. It looked like the commercial cleaning company were still visiting that floor. Emma found a quiet corner and focused her mind. Nothing again, apart from a definite something on a floor above her. Was the second floor Ella's domain ? Did mistress and servant have a floor each ? Not that it really mattered. Emma started to use the stairs to get up another floor.

"No.....Not the stairs, never the stairs....Be careful Emma."

Not feminine, she was now certain of it. The disembodied voice was that of a young boy, no more than ten or eleven years old.

"Talk to me.....Why not the stairs ?"

"Never the stairs."

That was it, another warning with no further explanation. Emma looked up the stairs and there was no obstruction, or anything that looked dangerous. She decided to accept the voice as a friend, rather than a foe. She went back to the elevator and pressed the button for the third floor. The contraption sighed twice, before rising and taking her up.

"Better than a ride at the fair..... And it's free." She muttered

No flowers on hall tables on the third floor, even plastic ones. A box of poison under a table told her the mouse control guy had been up there, but there wasn't much evidence of cleaning. Maybe a few marks of a vacuum cleaner cutting through the dust on the carpet, and a few wipes of a duster on a table. Ginie might think her home was now limited to three floors, but no one seemed to be using the third floor. There was a darkness that went beyond just the lack of sunlight on a winter's evening. There was a darkness about that hallway, a genuine unpleasant darkness.

"Come to me.....Never the stairs.....I'm waiting."

"Be patient, whoever you are."

Emma sat with her back against a wall and used her super senses to look over the top floor of the house. There was only one entity up there and it was covered by an impenetrable cloud of darkness. She didn't sense any evil, just an almost limitless ocean of fear and darkness.

"Crap, maybe I should have summoned Eliza to watch my back ?" She muttered.

Eliza Jenks, a witch with a definite leaning towards dark magic, even though she'd been dead since the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Elizabeth the first of course, though there had only been one Elizabeth on the throne up until then. Eliza was good in a fight, though Emma still hoped it wouldn't come to that. Just to be thorough, she turned on a single light near the stairs that led up to the top floor.

'H & H Cleaning Services

No Entry for

Cleaning Personnel

Past this point.'

They'd strung a chain across the handrails, about four steps up. The writing was in bright dayglow red letters, on a plain white background. Emma felt nothing dangerous or unnatural on the stairs, though she was beginning to trust the disembodied voice. She walked to the elevator and ignored the constant rattles and sighing sound, as it took her to the top floor.

"I'm waiting Emma."

Where did dust come from ? It had obviously been some time since H & H Cleaning had sent anyone up to the fourth floor. Dust covered everything, even the box of mouse poison quite close to the elevator. The sun had set, so Emma couldn't see that well.

"I'm over here....."

Definitely the voice of a young boy. Emma had spells ready in her head and could easily create a ball of almost blinding daylight. That might send the boy's soul running off to somewhere unpleasant and Emma still didn't think he was dangerous. He might have scared the crap out of Duncan the mouse guy, but that had probably been unintentional. Emma used a spell to improve her night vision and saw the boy sitting the way she often liked to sit, when she wanted to think.

"You know my name, will you tell me yours ?" She asked.

Small, probably eight or nine years old. The boy was sat on the floor, leaning back against the wall. He had his chin resting on his knees, as he watched her approach. He was dead of course, but she knew that didn't mean he couldn't talk or think. Hermione had been dead since the Victorian age, yet Emma considered the ghost to be her best friend. After her brother of course, Jerry Jnr was still the most important person in her life. Eliza had been dead even longer, though she wasn't really a friend. Eliza had sworn to be bound to Emma, probably until the end of time. Emma didn't really trust Eliza, but knew she'd never risk the consequences of breaking the oath she'd taken to serve her.

"I'm Peter.....Peter Maynard."

The Maynard line had been long and complex. They'd owned Glade Hall for centuries and even the town house in New York, had been theirs for generations. She had no recollection of a Peter Maynard who'd died as a child, but Ginie had a full family tree. Emma sat next to Peter and rested her chin on her knees.

"Why are you here Peter Maynard ?" She asked. "What stops you moving on ?"

The darkness almost engulfed her. That and the ocean of fear and despair coming from the ghost of the young boy. Emma had learned a spell from Eliza, which allowed a living human to have physical contact with the dead. She created the spell in her mind and spoke it to herself without uttering a sound. She hugged Peter Maynard in the dark and felt him tense.

"It's been too long since someone hugged you, I know it's a shock." She said. "You can trust me.....Tell me what happened to you ?"

"They brought me to see him, the old man. Something went wrong and they said it was my fault.....The pain came then, the terrible pain.....They put my body in a sack....."

He leant against her and Emma kissed the top of his head. She hadn't known ghosts could cry, until Peter began to weep. Dry tears, but the sorrow was real enough. She simply held him and waited, for the moment when he wanted to talk again.

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"This is delicious." Said Emma. "I hate to say this, but Ella should be a chef in a fancy, high priced restaurant."

"I only expect her to cook dinner and I do pay her well." Said Ginie. "She is good, though tonight I think she's come up with something special in your honour."

Emma had assumed Ella would eat with them. It seemed that wasn't the way the house routine worked. After serving their food and placing desert in what looked like a minibar, she'd taken her own dinner somewhere else to eat. Segregation of staff from mistress, or perhaps to give them privacy ? Whatever the reason, Emma wasn't going to mention it. It was Ginie's house and she was

just a guest in it for a few days. She just ate the superb Coq au vin and wondered if it might be time to learn to use her own kitchen, properly.

“You’re sure the boy said his name was Peter Maynard ?” Asked Ginie.

“Yes I am, he repeated it a few times. He had no idea who the old man was, or why they’d hurt him. Too young to be able to judge time, but he said he’s been here for a long time, just watching what happened in the house. It seems that my activities at Glade Hall, brought him fully awake.”

Ginie was obviously thinking, Emma could almost see the cog wheels turning.

“We’re a large family, as you know, there’s a mausoleum full of our ancestors in the grounds of Glade hall. A Peter Maynard though and in New York....Is a bit of a mystery. I will have to do some research.”

“He mentioned Calvin Coolidge being president, when I asked him if he had any idea of when he’d been brought here.” Said Emma.

“Yes.... Yes, that really does help. Coolidge pins it down to somewhere between nineteen twenty and about nineteen thirty, I think. I do love a good mystery.”

“Did you ever find a sack of old bones anywhere in the house ?” Asked Emma. “Peter did mention the attic a few times and he seemed scared of the stairs up to the top floor for some reason.”

They were at either end of a decent sized table. Ginie still leant forward, as though she wanted to whisper.

“To be honest, there were bones discovered during the construction of the elevator. All hushed up of course and I have no idea what happened to them. It seems I will have a lot of research to keep me busy. Not that it isn’t nice to discover another relative I knew nothing about, even if he is dead. But can you stop him haunting the place Emma ? I’d quite like to be able use the top floor again.” Could she ? Emma was certain she could use a fairly brutal spell to fling Peter out of the house. Doing it that way was going to be a last resort though.

“We will need your research and as with healing your face. No promises, but I am very hopeful. I feel the two things are going to be linked, though I’m not saying why I think that.”

“No, you can’t leave it like that Emma. Tell me why they’re linked ?”

Emma took the opportunity to get both their desserts from the nearby minibar fridge. A mixture of ices cream flavours, topped with sliced strawberries. She gave Ginie hers first, before sitting down again.

“Yum, this looks delicious.”

“Don’t change the subject Emma.”

“Alright..... What I do often looks like magic, in fact there are crossovers with what most people would think of as magic. Like all good magician’s, I refuse to reveal all my secrets.”

“Oh Emma, your mother never mentioned you being such a tease.”

She hadn’t seen that one coming, it hit her between the eyes and left her feeling stunned.

“Do you talk to my mum that often ?” She asked.

“I used to, almost every day at one time. Not for a long time now. I get the feeling that we’re not friends anymore. Your parents seem to have had enough of the Maynards. I’m surprised you haven’t.”

Emma felt a dampness in the corner of her left eye and hoped Ginie hadn’t noticed. Tears were now mercifully rare and almost never for herself. Usually she only noticed a single tear if it was for Jerry Jnr.

“To be honest Ginie, you’re the only family I have now.” She said.

“Family ?”

"We both serve the same old Gods Ginie, the same masters."

"I see what you mean..... Let me tell you about the real reason I asked you to come to New York."

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Emma slept well, which was unusual for her first night in a strange bed. There had been plenty of hot water and even a little winter sunshine coming through the window. She had coffee with Ella in the kitchen and heard about the local weather.

"It's really cold out Emma, I hope you brought a heavy coat ?"

She had, and she felt warm and comfortable, as she looked for where she was meeting Frank Sawyer. Ginie had described the street corner café, diner, coffee place, or whatever they were called in that part of New York.

"Walking distance from here, a good place for breakfast, it's been there for years." Ginie had told her. "You'll like it, and I think you'll like Frank once you get past..... You'll see."

The place looked clean and a warm waft of coffee scented air greeted her as she opened the door. Even the man behind the counter greeted her with a smile.

"I'm looking for Frank Sawyer." She said. "I was told he comes in here every morning."

The man looked her over and obviously decided she wasn't a cop, or anyone chasing one of his regulars for money. The man behind the counter pointed towards the rear of the diner.

"He's a regular alright; Frank is sometimes outside as we open up." He said. "There he is, the middle aged bald guy, still wearing his overcoat. Feels the cold does our Frank."

Emma sat opposite Frank without being asked, or even introducing herself. He looked up at her, with the face of a man who had all the world's problems on his shoulders. She was useless at guessing ages, but middle aged seemed to cover everyone from forty to sixty. Frank Sawyer looked at the top end of that range and he looked to have had a lot of mileage and several un-careful owners.

"Hi.....I'm Emma Hooper.....Angela Maynard called you about me."

He smiled briefly, before rubbing his hands together as though they were outdoors in arctic conditions.

"Well..... You picked a hell of a day for it. But help is help and I've had precious little help of any kind lately." Said Frank.

She could now understand why Ginie thought it might take her a while to like Frank. He ran Ginie's property empire and had been involved in the sale of two out her three properties. The last was about to be sold and then Frank would be looking for a new job. She could understand why his expression might make you think someone had just stolen his puppy.

"The problem, as you've probably heard, is Saul Pacca, the long term resident of 42 Back. Not that there is an apartment 42 in that building, at the back, or anywhere else. But there was in the building my grandfather managed for the Maynards. Saul was known as 42 Back then, and he'll always be known as 42 Back."

"Angela told me he's refusing to move out ?"

"Not so much refusing, as ignoring me when I try and talk to him about it."

Frank let out a long sigh and although Emma thought it was impossible, he managed to look even more depressed and dejected.

"We have a history with Saul....I mean my family. My grandfather got into trouble with a local mobster during prohibition and Saul helped him. Violence I'm talking about, lots of blood on the floor. My grandfather had a few nasty scars until the day he died, but he always swore that without Saul's help.... He'd have been killed in the 1930s."

"You're seriously telling me that Saul Pacca was around in the 1930s ?" She asked.

“My father knew him too; managing property for the Maynards has been a bit of a family tradition. My father was born in 1908, but didn’t start a family until he was my age. My grandfather was the same and he was born in 1853. He knew Saul as a tenant of a building owned by the Maynards on the Lower East Side. That was in about 1890.....Whether you believe it or not, my grandfather told my father, who told me, that Saul seems to have never aged a single day.”

Of all the people who could have been sent to see Frank, she was probably one of the few who were likely to believe him. She’d seen people who’d lived for centuries, yet remained young looking. The problem was that they were usually not quite human anymore, or even some kind of undead monster.

“I can see why Angela isn’t keen on telling him to move out.” Said Emma.

“It isn’t just fear; he has helped her deal with a few..... Difficult people over the years. She pays him of course, though no one knows what he does for a living. Saul leaves home early in the morning and comes home late in the evening. He pays his rent in cash.”

“Angela never mentioned employing him.” She said.

“Nothing full time, just taking care of people who needed..... Violence, Saul is damned good at violence. He helped me too, when someone wanted me to settle an old debt, or get my face rearranged. A word from Saul, and I suspect a fist too, and I had no more trouble.”

Crap ! Emma was on her own in a country where she had few contacts, and as she put it to Frank...

“I weigh about eight stone wet through, and Angela wants me to evict this guy.” She muttered.

Frank Sawyer actually leaned across the table and patted her arm.

“Welcome to my world.” He said. “Angela isn’t as rich as she once was, so the last building in her portfolio has to be sold. I was told you were the person to get Saul to move out. Angela told me she was sending for a consultant, a specialist.”

“First I need to see the problem with my own eyes.” She said. “I’ll go round to see Saul Pacca tonight. Any suggestions on the best time to knock on his door ?”

“He needs time to eat and relax a little, but before he settles down to watch a movie. When I need to see him about anything, I usually call on him at about nine. Don’t get me wrong, he’s not aggressive for the hell of it. All these years and I doubt if he’s so much as raised his voice to any of the other tenants.”

Emma did have a lot of abilities that didn’t rely on size, weight or the ability to use her fists. She had a few ideas on how to deal with whatever creature Saul turned out to be. He couldn’t be human of course, they tended not to be around for close to two hundred years.

“I’ll see him tonight then.” She said. “Any tips on how to handle him ?”

“Beer, lots of it. He’s not fussy, so the cheap stuff will do. He likes chocolate bars too, and again.... He’s not fussy. Just buy as much beer and chocolate as you can carry.”

He patted her arm again and Emma was beginning to like Frank. She no longer saw the face of a depressed man who’d taken several thrashing from a cruel life. In his expression, she now saw a reflection of her own feelings.

~ ~

It was obviously cleaning day when Emma returned to Ginie’s house. Ginie was out somewhere, doing the prodigious amounts of research she’d promised to do, and Ella was fussing around the cleaners. When H & H cleaners arrived, they seemed to arrive in numbers. There appeared to be at least six of them, all armed with mops and dusters. Emma told them not to disturb her for anything....

“Nothing, nothing at all.....I’m going to lock the door to my room.”

The lack of a key didn't stop her locking the door, and using various spells to make her as secure, as if she was inside a reinforced concrete box. Nothing was going to interrupt her. The question was though, whether to summon Hermione as her ghostly helper, or Eliza.

"Hmhhh Eliza will start a fight, I know her too well by now." She muttered.

Eliza Jenks was immensely powerful for a dead witch, and she had a quick temper. Plus she was always looking for an angle, a side hustle, usually to increase her skills, or obtain a useful artefact. The last thing Emma wanted was Eliza trying to recruit Saul into one of her schemes. It was going to be Hermione Wood, the ghost of a dead seventeen year old Victorian girl.

"...If I can summon her properly across such a distance..." She mumbled.

The idea of a medium calling up the spirit of a Native American Indian chief, at a Séance in leafy Surrey, was rubbish. Emma didn't fully understand why, but the dead were linked to where they'd died, or lived most of their lives. Probably due to that being where they'd left most spiritual traces of their lives, though she wasn't sure. It was hard to summon ghosts at a distance and over three thousand miles away across the Atlantic, was a hell of a distance. She had learned that a key part of a successful distance summoning, was being loud and insistent. Emma sat cross legged on the rug at the foot of her bed.

"Hermione !" She shouted. "Come to me ! Come to me now !"

Daylight outside, which was another problem. Like radio waves, the souls of the dead found it easier to move through the ether during the hours of darkness. A single plastic flower was lifted out of a vase and into the air, before being flung across the room. Apart from that, her summoning appeared to have no effect.

"Obey my call Hermione !..... Or I'll summon Eliza.... She never lets me down."

Cruel, unfair and above all, untrue. Emma hated pitting one of them against the other, but having one of them to watch her back was essential. The plastic flower moved across the room, to land in her lap.

"That's a start....Come on Hermione, you are my best friend. I need you."

"I don't like it there Emma..... There's something evil in that house."

Still no visual presence of Hermione, but a disembodied voice was better than nothing.

"That'll be Peter, he's just lost and confused. Come on Hermione, we've faced far worse than him. I really can't do this without you."

Emma was beginning to feel like a manipulative parent, trying emotional blackmail on a teenage daughter. It was a feeling she didn't like, even if it was working. The face of Hermione arrived first and then her body. Emma had helped her work on her appearance. The long dead teen no longer appeared in the party dress she'd been killed in. Jeans, a T shirt and trainers were now her usual spiritual clothing, with the occasional personal accessorising.

"He's not what you think." Said Hermione.

"Who isn't ?"

"It isn't even a boy.....It listens.....It is scared of you, or it would have attacked me."

"No one can overhear us in here Hermione. I have applied many spells to make this room totally secure."

Hermione sat cross legged in front of her and smiled. Her friend had the brightest Aura Emma had ever seen on a ghost. Normally a bright white, with flecks of yellow if she was unhappy. Traces of red if she was angry, and as now....Small explosions of purple if she was scared.

"Don't worry Hermione, he can't hurt you."

"It Emma.....It wants to destroy me."

Not easy to kill something that was already dead, but it could be done. Emma had thrown hundreds of dark sprits into the abyss when she'd burned Glade Hall to the ground, and a few good ones too.

"I need you to come with me tonight. Can you make yourself small and hide from it until then?"

"Of course I can. Its powers are huge, but crude."

"Good, just keep hidden until I call you. We're going to see Saul Pacca. Who lives in a building not that far from here. It would appear that he's looked the same for nearly two hundred years and maybe even longer."

"Not human then..... What do you want me to do?" Asked Hermione

"Be visible to Saul, I want to see how he reacts. Just let him see you."

"Are you going to add him to the Stone of Sárk, the soul stone?"

"I'm not sure yet.....If I do, it will be a last resort. Whatever he is, Saul Pacca doesn't seem to be a bad person. Just watch him and we'll discuss him later.... Keep a trick or two up your sleeve though Hermione. Just in case he does attack me."

Poor Hermione, her aura was full of exploding areas of purple. Her friend was loyal and could be quite courageous. She just needed more faith in herself.

~ ~

Frank Sawyer was right, there was no apartment 42, at the back, or anywhere else. Just after 9 on a dark, cold winter's night in New York. Emma was having trouble seeing the names against the bells, until a passing truck briefly illuminated the board. Nineteen apartments and Saul Pacca was in number 17. A few ignored presses on the bell, told her Saul was probably in for the night and didn't fancy company. Locks were no problem for her, especially locks like the cheap, worn lock on the building's front door. Locks were so easy, that many practitioners of the dark arts often liked to pretend opening spells, weren't really worthy of being called spells. Cantrip was the word Eliza used for such minor magics. Emma put her hand against the lock and muttered a single word, in a long dead language. She moved her hand left and right a few times and felt the lock open. The door swung open to reveal a grubby floor and rows of mail boxes.

"Are you still with me Hermione?"

"Yes.... This place is a bit squalid."

Hermione appeared to her, though no human with normal eyesight would be able to see her.

"Well.... Ginie does want to sell the place." Said Emma. "I imagine there isn't much incentive to keep it looking nice."

A few of the mailboxes were jammed with uncollected mail and circulars. The one for number 17 was clear, the door free of dust. There was no elevator, so Emma took the stairs two at a time, until she reached the top floor.

'Apartments 13 to 19'

Said the sign on the wall in front of her. She found the door to number 17 to her right and a little way down the hall. The sound of a TV set could be clearly heard coming from inside.

"He probably settled down with a movie a bit early." Said Emma. "Are you ready?"

"Alright.....I will know if he can see me." Said Hermione.

Emma had a ring in her pocket, which had once belonged to John Dee in the fifteen eighties, who had either passed it on to Asher Benedict, or Asher had stolen it. Emma had beaten Asher in a fair fight, though Eliza had claimed the ring. As Eliza had taken a vow to obey Emma, getting the ring from her had been quite easy. Emma put the ring on her wedding finger, purely because it fitted nice and snugly onto that finger.

"That thing is dangerous." Said Hermione.

"I know, but until we know what manner of creature Saul is....."

John Dee's old ring was capable of casting several powerful spells, all instantly ready without the usual incantations or rhyming repetitions. All the spells were hybrids of different styles and abilities, part fire and part pure chaos. All were battle spells and all of them were deadly. Emma ignored the bell push next to the door and used to her fist to hammer on the door, three times.

"He must have heard that." She muttered.

The man who answered the door wasn't what she'd expected, even though he was unlikely to actually be a man. Only five foot six or seven and not at all heavily built. Red hair cut quite short and a ginger stubble on his chin that looked thick enough to have been deliberate. Dark eyes, the darkest brown eyes she'd ever seen. Even his clothing was a surprise. Saul seemed to favour denim jeans and a sweatshirt when he watched TV.

"My name is Emma Hooper." She said. "Angela Maynard asked me to call and talk to you about finding a new home."

Saul Pacca could see Hermione and he wasn't attempting to hide it. He seemed to have eyes only for her, barely giving Emma any attention at all. Departed spirits rarely worked with the living, though Emma usually took her friendship with Hermione for granted. Saul couldn't have looked more surprised, if she'd been stood at his door with a tethered unicorn.

"My friend is Hermione Wood." Said Emma. "Can you spare a few minutes to talk to us?"

"Yes..... Yes, of course. Where are my manners, please come in."

His home was full of Christmas decoration, which didn't fit the moody man of violence she'd heard about from Frank Sawyer. Greetings cards had been pushed into a bookcase, a lot of greetings cards for a man who no one thought had a family. A few streamers crossed the room and there was even a decorated Christmas tree to the right of the fireplace. A proper tree, the smell of it brought back memories of family Christmases at home.

"Sit down....Can I get you anything ? Tea, coffee.....Beer ? I'm assuming you talked to Frank and the contents of the bags are for me ?"

"Yes, sorry." Said Emma. "I just didn't expect all.....This."

"I even put up a few bits at Halloween, though you probably think that would be more appropriate." Said Saul.

Emma hadn't bought the cheapest beer and chocolate in the store, but it wasn't the most expensive either. She'd bought chocolate that deserved to be called chocolate, and beer that she'd happily drink herself.

"I wouldn't mind one of those beers." She told him.

Hermione quietly hovered of course and moved through walls into parts of Saul's home that she would probably never see. Not that he seemed to care in the slightest. Emma sat on Saul's old but comfortable sofa and sipped at a can of beer. Saul sat on the edge of the coffee table in front of her, nibbling on a chocolate Santa. Emma had added a few of those to one of the bags.

"Travelling with a ghost huh ? I've never seen that before." Said Saul.

"Hermione is my best friend."

Even if Saul wasn't at all skilled in the dark arts, or good magic for that matter. He could have hired someone to put wards and blocks on his home, perhaps even something to limit the use of destructive spells. Saul hadn't done that, his home was wide open. Someone could enter his home while he was in bed and slit his throat while he slept. Not that Emma was above doing that herself, though only as a very, very last resort. There was something about the guy nibbling at a Belgian chocolate Santa, while watching Hermione flit around his home. Emma was beginning to like Saul.

"I suppose you've come to try and evict me?" Asked Saul. "Accompanied with a few threats about the building being pulled down while I'm still in it."

"Not an idle threat Saul. The building has been sold to property developers." Said Emma.

"I've heard it all before, every couple of years when Angela wants to put the rent up."

"She's not lying to you Saul." Said Hermione.

That shocked him, it had surprised Emma too. Hermione rarely even attempted to talk to strangers.

"Wow.....She can talk! Sorry Hermione, I meant.....Wow."

"All spirits can talk Saul." Said Hermione. "It's just that few humans can hear us. But I suspect you're not quite human."

A part of the conversation Emma had been dreading, a genuine potential trigger for violence and mayhem. Saul just continued to smile at Hermione, as though she was his oldest friend.

"Clever.....Alright clever clogs, tell me, what am I?" He asked.

"The longevity, the strength." Said Emma. "You love chocolate and beer, yet I suspect you're usually a carnivore."

"I can tell from his Aura." Said Hermione. "Only one type of chaotic creature has such a dark aura."

"Hey, I'm not that chaotic." Said Saul. "Enough teasing.... Do you really know what I am, or not?"

Emma looked at Hermione and nodded at her.

"A ghouL." Said Hermione.

"Yes, a ghouL." Said Emma. "Derived from the Arabic ghūL, or ghāla. Not that I'm judging. You might feed on human flesh, but only after they're dead."

"I've known far worse creatures than you." Added Hermione.

Poor Saul, he really hadn't thought they'd see him for what he was. Emma had already put ghouL at the top of her list, which had become a certainty once she'd talked to him. There was something about the way a ghouL moved and talked. The real giveaway was the way his jaws moved as he ate the chocolate Santa.

"It means nothing.....This could all be another attempt by Angela to put up the rent. You can tell her I'm not her platinum credit card. Though.....I could probably find another few dollars every month. Not too much though, I'm not a wealthy man."

Emma had no doubt that Saul Pacca didn't earn a fortune. She hadn't met many ghouLs, but all of them had worked in the funeral business. It gave them reasonably safe access to decaying human flesh.

"Angela doesn't want more rent and I'm definitely not here to give you a hard time. It's not a lie, the building is being sold to a property developer. This will all be trendy shops soon. You have to move out." Said Emma.

GhouLs weren't exactly cuddly, yet Emma wanted to hug poor Saul. Once the truth hit him, it had obviously left him feeling dejected.

"Where will I go?" He asked. "I've lived in one of the Maynard's properties since.....I think the civil war was still going on."

"I can't guarantee to find you a new home, but I'll try." Said Emma.

"Where would you like to live?" Asked Hermione. "What would be your ideal home?"

Saul took a can of beer from the bag she'd brought and took a long swig.

"I suppose, being truthful. Somewhere small would do, as long as there was room for a fridge and somewhere to plug in the TV. A chocolate shop one side of course and a brewery the other."

He began to laugh and the laughter was infectious. Emma had known and befriended some strange creatures, some of them even dead, or undead. She was determined to help Saul if she possibly could.

"I'm not sure about the brewery, but I will make a few calls." She said. "Before we leave, can I ask you something about the American Maynards?"

"Yes, ask away."

"Do you remember a Peter Maynard who died as a child?"

"No there never was a Peter. The Maynards were always into fancy names like James, the sort of name that doesn't sound weird if you put King in front of it. Or the old biblical names, like Nathaniel, and I think there was even an Isambard once. No Peter though. I'm certain of it."

"I told you so." Said Hermione.

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Emma had no idea where Ginie had gone to do research. Somewhere that allowed her to take printouts and copies though, the large table in the dining room was covered in them. Ella had supplied coffee and a plateful of cookies, before going to bed. The cookies had just started to go a little stale, but they were still enjoyable.

"I managed to find the key dates." Said Ginie. "According to the register of births, there never was a Peter Maynard."

"Saul said there was no Peter too. He thought the name was far too plain vanilla for the Maynards."

Emma looked at Ginie, trying to see if she looked upset.

"Sorry, I keep forgetting you're a Maynard." She said.

"That's alright; I have no illusions about my ancestors, though I'm not totally ashamed of all of them. A few carried out good works, there's even a plaque to Isambard Maynard in the local museum. He built the first free school in the area."

"Did you find out anything about the bones found in the house?" Asked Emma.

"Yes, though much of what I thought, turned out to be untrue. I visited Frank and he told me you'd been to see him."

"I do quite like him, despite his aura of doom and gloom."

"So do I Emma, so do I. Anyway, it appears the sack of bones was found during the construction of the elevator shaft, but in the garden, not the house. Frank's father was looking after the Maynard properties then and he was tasked with disposing of the bones. His father was a God fearing man though and he assumed the small bones were those of a child, probably someone disposing of a sickly or unwanted baby. There was no way he was going to throw the remains of the poor mite into the river. He left the bones on the doorstep of his priest, hoping they'd get a decent burial."

"It sounds as though Frank's father was a good man." Said Emma.

"Oh, you didn't know him, neither did I for that matter. He dealt with a lot of problems for the Maynards and he definitely wasn't squeamish about hurting adults. I was surprised to hear about his action with the bones, but I managed to confirm it."

"More of your researches.....Do you want your coffee topped up?"

"Yes, thank you Emma. The priest did the right thing and handed the bones over to the police. There is still a record of it in their archives, if you know who to ask. The police had tests done and it turns out the bones were from an adult, probably male. A hundred years those bones had rested in the ground, until the builders dug them up. The remains of someone who died of some kind of wasting disease. So, we can disregard whatever nonsense the fake Peter Maynard told you."

"Nothing about strange goings on in the attic?" Asked Emma.

"I can't be certain, I was only looking for headlines in newspaper archives. I doubt it though....I get the feeling that was another red herring from whatever has claimed the top floor of my house. Do you have any idea what it might be?"

"Oh Ginie.... Do you want the truth or a reassuring lie?"

"That bad?"

"I think it might be."

"Come on, out with it..... What disgusting thing is in my home?"

"Firstly, it will probably be expecting me to try and evict it from the house. Hermione said it listens to what goes on in the house."

"And as she's a ghost, she should know." Said Ginie.

"Exactly..... As to what it is? I think it's whatever was sent to burn Nathaniel James Maynard to death in his own bed. After I destroyed Glade Hall and much of the Glade, it was stuck here, trapped. A long way from home, with no contact with its masters. It has been fairly harmless, but it could do anything."

"Yes Emma, you're right. It has to go.... But what sort of wraith is it?"

"One that knows I'm coming, but honestly, it could be anything. If I had to guess, I'd say a dark soul that had been drawn to the Glade and then put to use by the witch Eloise Ward. That is only a guess and no asking Eloise she's been flung into the abyss."

"When will you make your move?"

"Tonight, when you're in bed Ginie. Probably around four in the morning."

"I'm not brave, never have been." Said Ginie. "If you need help I will come with you."

"No, but I do appreciate the offer. I will summon some help though, quite powerful help. Stay in your room tonight, no matter what you hear. I've already told Ella."

"If it listens to what we say, you'll be walking into a trap."

"I know, and being a dark soul, it will be at its strongest during the darkest hour of the night. Don't forget that much of my power comes from the darkness. At four in the morning I will be at my strongest too."

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"He's not a ghost." Said Hermione. "I don't think it's anything male, or female either. Not a witch, I'd have felt that when you first summoned me here. The Glade has been luring and trapping dark souls and even darker entities for centuries. It might be something really old."

"Something there's no name for you mean?"

"Maybe."

Emma was sat on the rug at the foot of her bed again, the Stone of Sárk on a chain around her neck. Sárk had been a place not a person, a city destroyed when the world was young. A soul stone, it could hold the dark and twisted souls of hundreds of dead entities. Once back at the Glade, the souls could be fed to the sacred standing stones as an offering to the Ancient Dark Gods. Sometimes, if the offerings had been particularly good, the Gods would grant a favour in return.

"Take a guess Hermione, what are we going to be fighting?" Asked Emma.

"The dark soul of a warrior, so twisted by centuries in the service of the Glade, that even it has forgotten who it once was."

"Wow, I wish I hadn't asked now."

Hermione brushed a nebulous hand across her cheek and Emma just about felt it.

"I will help you.....I can be brave." Said Hermione.

"I'm going to summon Eliza, mainly so she can draw the fire of....Whatever it is."

“She won’t like that.”

“Then we mustn’t tell her.”

No need for a summoning circle or any wards of protection. The ghost of the Elizabethan witch was still slightly feral, though domesticated enough to trust in Ginie’s house. Eliza Jenks had been bound to serve Emma and she’d agreed to be bound without any undue coercion.

“Eliza.....I summon you.....Come to me, come to the new world.” Said Emma.

Poor dead Eliza, killed by a rival witch when she’d still been relatively young. Death didn’t hinder a truly powerful witch though and Eliza had learned a lot over the course of the centuries. As far as Emma knew though, she’d never been to America, the new world. Emma felt a little puff of air against her cheek.

“I’m busy !”

“Come on Eliza, or do I need to chain you up again ?”

“Oh, I’ve heard a lot about Merica.... Little of it was good.” Muttered Eliza.

Eliza’s appearance varied with her current mood. Everything from an archetypal dark witch, right down to the lank hair and facial warts, on a bad day. Eliza was stood in front of her, looking like a fairly normal dark haired woman in her early forties. It had taken a lot of work to enable Hermione to carry even small objects, or dress herself in the nebulous clothing of her choice. To Eliza it seemed to come naturally. Emma handed her the ring which contained many spells of chaos and burning. Eliza put it on her finger, as though there was bone and muscle to put it on.

“Thank you Emma.”

“I told you I only needed to borrow it. I have need of your help and you will probably need the ring.”

Eliza sat on the floor and smiled at her. If there was one thing Eliza really enjoyed, it was the likelihood of violence and the opportunity to practise her dark arts.

“I can feel it, at the top of the house.” Said Eliza. “A Gidim, a shade escaped from hell or somewhere similar. Part spirit, part demon, really nasty. If we’re really unlucky it will turn out to be Sumerian and they’re the worst.”

Emma looked at Hermione and winked. Eliza was probably right, she knew her creatures and shades very well. The trick was not letting her know they hadn’t known what their enemy was, or Eliza would be hell to live with, for months.

“Yes, a Gidim.....Has to be.” Said Hermione.

“Our thoughts exactly.” Added Emma.

“Alright.....I suppose you want me to keep it busy while you do something clever ?” Asked Eliza.

“Yes, Hermione can stay close to me, while you create mayhem Eliza. Just be careful, there are two human females in the house, non-combatants. I have told them to stay in their rooms.”

For a long dead witch, Eliza never seemed to run out of energy. A real ‘get it done’ wraith who loved to get stuck in. She vanished without saying another word and there was the sound of a muffled thump somewhere in the house.

“Come on Hermione, we’ll take the stairs. It’ll give me time to think of something clever to do to this Gidim.”

“I bet it turns out to be Sumerian.” Said Hermione.

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Eliza Jenks didn’t just have the ring. She was wearing a robe obtained from a dealer in arcane artefacts, in exchange for a few gem stones she’d found while doing another job for Emma. Some might think it would be hard for a ghost to buy and sell, but it was easy, if you knew the right people.

The robe would give her protection against fire, one of the few things she truly feared. She moved through the floors and ceilings, stopping when she got to the third floor.

“Where are you Gidim ?” She muttered. “I know you’re up there. I can smell you, the entire house reeks of you.”

Emma had told her about humans being in the house and for some reason, the girl became angry if humans were hurt or killed. Oh, she made a hell of a fuss if a human was killed, even if it was completely accidental.

“Not that she hasn’t killed a few.” She mumbled.

Telling her humans were around meant no burning the place to the ground, or major structural damage. Not that Emma had told her that, it was just something that didn’t need to be told. Minor damage though, as long as it wasn’t too bad.....Eliza created a spell in her mind.

“Just a little flash bang, barely worse than a firework.”

She pushed the spell up to the middle of the fourth floor, before letting her magical thunderflash explode. There was the sound of a muffled thud, to tell her the spell had done its job.

“Oh, now I see you Gidim.....Run about all you like.....You’ll never escape Emma Hooper, never.”

Emma had destroyed Asher Benedict, a powerful occultist Eliza had thought was indestructible. Every fight had to be taken seriously, but compared to Asher, a grubby Gidim, hiding in the shadows....

“Shredding you and flinging you into the abyss will be a piece of piss.”

Eliza sent two more flashbangs up to the fourth floor and enjoyed sensing the confusion in the mind of the shade, the Gidim. She followed the last one up, hiding in the shadows as it exploded. A small and carefully aimed cone of flames down the centre of the top floor hallway, and Eliza was beginning to enjoy herself. She could feel the fear in the Gidim as it ran for cover until..... She could no longer sense where it was.

“A fucking Sumerian, maybe even a skilled Etemmu.... I knew it.”

Eliza thought she was safe, she’d done the unforgiveable and let her guard down. She felt the Gidim’s finger as it went across the back of her spectral neck. Cold as ice was that finger and its touch had the ability to paralyse anyone, even a nebulous ghost. For a dead thing like Eliza, paralysis meant collapsing to the ground, barely able to think at all. Her eyes worked though and something was moving towards her. An Etemmu skilled in the darkest of dark arts was walking towards her, cloaking itself in shadows as it came. All Eliza could do was watch and wait...

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Hermione Wood had tried to stay close to Emma. Eliza’s whizz bangs had lifted the dust off the floor though, turning it into an impenetrable fog. There hadn’t been a scream or any of Eliza’s infamous foul language, but Hermione knew the witch was in trouble. Emma would have known that too, which was probably why she’d run into the clouds of dust. Run to where though ? Hermione tried to sense Emma in the dark clouds of dust and grime, while applying layers upon layer of protective spells. Ghosts are naturally good at hiding. No breathing to give away their location and no body heat to set off alarms and sensors. Hermione had added to those natural advantages with two hundred years of learning from and listening to the witches that had been drawn to Glade Hall. ...There was the distinct sound of heavy blows.

She couldn’t feel Emma, but the sound led her to Eliza, just as the shade stopped using the back of a wooden chair to beat the dead witch and began to use its feet to kick her. All impossible of course, as both the entities weren’t corporeal, but Hermione could hear the blows and sense Eliza’s pain.

“Leave her alone.”

Hermione yelled, before quickly moving to another location and applying more layers of spells to hide her. She was closer to Eliza, close enough to feel the pain and distress coming off the dead witch in waves. Hermione knew nothing about Gidims, apart from the fact they were too ancient to get into any of the usual respected books. They had to have the power to hurt the dead without using fire, which was rare. Even the mighty Asher Benedict had used a door of fire to keep unwanted wraiths and spectres out of his domain.

....The sound of heavy blows began again.

He, she, or it was kicking Eliza again, as she lay motionless on the ground. Where was Emma ? Eliza was dead and that meant she could soak up a lot of punishment. Eventually she'd be damaged beyond repair and flung into the abyss. Where from there ? Hermione didn't think Eliza was likely to be welcome anywhere other than hell.

"I warned you." She shouted. "Keep hurting her and I'll burn you."

Hermione wasn't good at destructive spells. She used a small fireball spell on the Gidim, before once again, moving quickly to another location. Still impossible to make out the true form of the shade, but the fire seemed to have hurt it. Hermione could feel its pain and anger.

....The sound of heavy blows began again.

Where was Emma ? Was she hurt ? Lying dead somewhere ? Hermione still couldn't feel her friend, but she could feel that Eliza Jenks was close to death, real death for a ghost, the permanent kind. They weren't friends, but they had fought together on a few of Emma's forays into the world of dark magicians and evil occultists. Hermione used every bit of spell power she could find, to create the most powerful fireball spell she could. Nothing compared to what Emma could do, but Emma seemed to be out of the picture.

"Leave her alone you bastard." Yelled Hermione.

Hermione poured everything into the fireball spell, aiming it where the head should have been, if Gidims were even slightly human in appearance. She felt it burn and for a fraction of a second, she was certain there had been an animal type of scream. Hermione was good at projecting a bright, pure aura.

"Bright as sunlight." Emma had once called it.

Such a bright white aura would drain her, but Hermione knew the Gidim were creatures of the dark and shadows. They'd long ago rejected the light and now lived in dark places. Her aura was hurting it, as it lit up the entire top floor of the house. It screamed.....But refused to give up and leave the house. As Hermione fell onto her knees, all her powers depleted. The cloud of darkness moved towards her.

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Eliza could take a good beating, Emma knew that. Somewhere deep down, where she hid the emotions she wasn't proud of, she thought Eliza deserved to have the crap kicked out of her at least twice a year. She was a dead dark witch of immense power, who'd happily sold curses for people to use on their family and neighbours. She was also becoming..... And she hated having the thought in her head, a friend. Watching her get kicked about was one thing, but the dead witch was still some way off being given a true death.

"Leave her alone." She heard Hermione shout.

Hermione was good at keeping hidden. Emma knew that, it was the way she'd managed to get close enough to Asher Benedict, to cover him in an infestation of biting, crawling children of Ammit. It wasn't nice to think of Hermione being hurt, but Emma had to keep watching and learning. She had no idea what a Gidim could do, much less what its weaknesses might be. The only way to find out

was to watch it, as her two friends tried to avoid being shredded and flung into the abyss. She remained hidden inside an impenetrable sphere of invisibility, as Hermione used fire on the Gidim. "I warned you." Hermione shouted. "Keep hurting her and I'll burn you."

Fire worked, it had hurt the Sumerian shade. Emma began to build a fire spell in her mind. A very powerful fire, one centred on the target, but unlikely to destroy Ginie's house. The Ancient Dark Gods of the Glade had granted Emma physical immortality, her body would never know the ravages of old age. She'd never die a natural death and feel the gates of hell summoning her. She wasn't certain of an immeasurably long life though, there were always accidents to worry about, or being ripped apart while fighting creatures.... Like the Gidim. She rarely thought about the huge lifespan she risked with every fight, but the idea did force its way into her consciousness.

"Leave her alone you bastard." Yelled Hermione.

Emma learned a lot from watching Hermione's fireball hit the Gidim. The bright white aura Hermione was so good at, hinted at other weaknesses in their enemy. Was it right to use her friends as guinea pigs? Probably not, but every general worth his or her salt had measured the reach of their enemy's weapons with the lives of their warriors. Hermione was a heap on the floor, the Gidim moving in for the kill.

"Enough." Shouted Emma.

The ball of daylight she cast against the ceiling would hurt the shade and hopefully blind it for a while. It would hurt Hermione and Eliza too, but not seriously. As the Gidim moved back, there was the hint of a spectral body beneath the dark cloud it was covered with. Emma had the impression of several legs and quite a few arms. As for the head? She just picked up a fleeting glimpse of a jaw, full of rotting teeth.

...It screeched at her, a definite screech.

Emma stood her ground as the Gidim ran at her. As the spectral shape hit her body, Emma placed her hand on its dreadful, misshapen, rotting face. She unleashed the fireball spell and smelt it burning. Its eyes were looking at her through the flames and hatred was still coming from their gaze. A nasty, slimy, grubby arm reached up and a long thin finger ran across Emma's cheek. Emma's muscles tensed slightly, but otherwise, the paralysing touch had no effect on her.

"You really don't know who you're up against." Said Emma.

Emma has expected it to have many eyes, like an ancient insect. There were only two though and they were a grubby orange colour, like the eyes of a feral beast. Those eyes now showed doubt. Emma removed the soul stone from around her neck and thrust it into that dreadful face. Her hand went up to the wrist in the rotting filth.

"Sident, Sident, amorentil, nevesh." She screamed.

The cloud of darkness vanished instantly, as the Stone of Sárk greedily swallowed the Gidim's soul, or whatever the evil shade had left of its soul. Emma noticed there was still a foul smelling grey slime on her hand, but of the creature itself.....There was nothing left of it, not even a pile of dust on the grubby floor.

"Probably for the best.....No foul body to dispose of." She muttered.

Some wood panelling was smouldering, though mercifully her carefully aimed fire and burning, hadn't seriously damaged Ginie's home. Hermione was leant over Eliza, rubbing a nebulous hand over the cheek of the dead witch.

"She's not a child Hermione." She said. "Come on Eliza, stop messing around, there are things to be done."

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A cold Christmas Eve morning in Oxfordshire and Emma heard the church clock strike thirteen. It was really seven; the clock had been playing up since a doodlebug had hit the village in nineteen forty four. A quick check in the mirror and she was ready for what was going to be a busy day. She found Saul Pacca sitting at the long bar in the Copper Kettle, which was the only bar. He was enjoying morning coffee and cheese on toast. Emma had owned the pub for a few years, after buying it from Dan Freeman. The apartment upstairs gave her a home close to the Glade, which was essential. "How are you settling in Saul?" She asked.

"Great....Out of bed and downstairs for breakfast. Bloody perfect Emma."

No getting round it, her new rent free lodger was a little weird, even for a Ghoul. He'd wanted a secure home and a little distance from his old life. Emma had badly needed someone with a bit of muscle to add to her team of....What the hell were they? Problem solvers, doers of the impossible, occult guns for hire? She'd begun to think of them as her Scoobys, which was a bit cheesy, but accurate.

"I heard you got the job." She said.

"Yes, I start after Christmas. Leroy didn't even ask about my immigration status."

"A phone call or two will sort that out....After Christmas though Saul, after Christmas."

Leroy's family had bought the local funeral business, after the previous people had wanted to move. A lot of locals had wanted to leave the area after the fire at Glade Hall. Experienced staff were hard to find and Saul needed a job that gave him access to human flesh.

"I'm sure I don't need to warn you to be careful, until Leroy begins to trust you." She said.

Saul nodded at her and smiled. For a creature that had been old when Columbus had bumped into America. A Ghoul who fed on decaying human flesh... Saul had a friendly smile.

"Not a problem Emma. You'd be amazed at what they do with internal organs at an autopsy. Always easy to find a few titbits to stop my tummy rumbling. Sorry, I sometimes forget your gender and tender years."

"No problem Saul, you'd be amazed what I've seen for my tender years."

She joined him for coffee, though she couldn't face cheese on toast for breakfast. There were definite advantages to living above the pub, the main one being not having to use her kitchen for weeks, if she didn't want to.

"You're sure you want me there, at the Glade?" Asked Saul.

"Yes, though you can keep well back with Tommy and the others. You need to be there so they can acknowledge your presence and get used to you. It's important."

"Don't worry, I'll be there."

"I know you will, I've asked Tommy to drive you there."

Tommy Milner still ran the farm, just about the only part of the Glade Hall estate to survive the fire. The farm and the old Maynard Mausoleum, though that hadn't escaped completely unscathed.

Tommy had been the first of her Scooby's. He owed her; she had saved him from life imprisonment for a murder he never committed. Had the death and many others been her fault? Maybe, but if the end could ever be said to justify the means, it justified what she'd done the night of the fire.

"I need to pick my brother up, I'll see you at the Glade." She said.

Strange to be thinking about a ritual for the Ancient Dark Gods, when the Copper Kettle was decorated for Christmas. Every year one of the staff bought a few new bits, without throwing out anything old. They had two fake Christmas trees, one either side of the main windows, which overlooked the car park. As for streamers and tinsel? Along with the fairy lights, they probably constituted a fire hazard, but to hell with it...It was Christmas.

“Call Ginie, check everything.” She muttered. “If not, it’ll all fall apart, you know it will.”

Saul was now a very permanent occupant of her guest suite, so Ginie had been put up at a hotel in nearby Enstone. Actually it was the only hotel in Enstone, but it was clean and comfortable.

“Hi Ginie.”

“Don’t worry Emma, I’m not suffering from cold feet. Maybe a little chilly, but not cold. I will be there, I promise.”

“Good I have a gift for you.” Said Emma.

“Now I’m intrigued, what sort of gift ?”

“Just be there.”

Ella had been in left in New York, to keep an eye on the builders. The damage to the fourth floor had turned out to be quite bad. Once it was habitable again, Ginie was determined to move back to the top floor. Emma checked the Stone of Sárk was around her neck, as she climbed into her car.

“Herding cats.....Awkward cats at that.” She mumbled.

Emma started her car, before turning it off again and calling her mother. Not a pleasant task, but it had to be done.

“Hi mum.”

“Don’t worry, Jerry Jnr is up, dressed and looking forward to Christmas with his big sister.”

Was there less of an edge to her mum’s voice ? Maybe even..... Warmth ?

“Thanks mum, I will keep him safe.”

“I know you will....Ginie called me yesterday. She told me how much you’d helped her. She explained some things I hadn’t understood. Crap, I’m useless at these kinds of things. It would be nice to have you here with us on Christmas day.”

“I would like to, but so much has been arranged. Ginie is here and a few of the regulars at the pub have been organising like crazy. Tommy even dragged a yule log in from somewhere. We’re going to have Christmas lunch in front of the fire in the long bar.”

“I understand, Ginie said you had plans. Maybe next week.....? When you bring Jerry back. I can make us all a family lunch.”

“That sounds brilliant mum.”

Emma didn’t cry, but she did sit quietly for a while, before starting her car again.

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“You’re sure you won’t join us Tommy ?” Asked Emma.

“No.... I’ll help you all can, but.....No, that side of my life is over.”

No one could ever completely walk away, once their blood had been tasted, but the Old Gods would probably leave Tommy alone. They had her now and all the tainted souls she’d brought them. For the first time in quite a while, Emma could actually say it with confidence.....

“I understand Tommy. Stay by the edge of the Glade and you’ll be safe.”

Hardly a huge crowd with her, Eliza and Hermione were just about visible in the shadows under a particularly large yew tree. Two regulars from the pub who knew the secrets of the Glade and had helped her a few times, and that was it, the full extent of her gang of occult guns for hire. There was Saul now of course, though he showed no signs of wanting to get closer to the standing stone.

“I mean your Gods no disrespect, but my skills are largely physical, rather than magical.”

He’d told her on the plane from New York. She understood, there were as many factions of chaos, as there were different types of religions. Emma nodded at Saul, as he stood near Eliza. Emma joined Ginie and her brother.

“Are you both ready ?” She asked.

"If you say this is essential, I will trust you Emma." Said Ginie. "I have served the Glade all my life and was brought here as a child.....But this place really scares."

"You have my word that no harm will come to you Ginie, and there is the matter of your gift."

"Can I know what it is yet?"

"Not yet."

Next her brother Jerry Jnr. He wasn't the tiny boy she'd brought to the Glade after destroying her family home, but he was still only six, seven in three month's time. He understood a little of what was going on, but mostly trusted her to look after him. Her mother would go crazy if she'd known he was within miles of the Glade, but Emma knew he was safe.

"Are you ready Jerry?" She asked.

"Will it hurt?"

"No..... Just kneel next to me once we get to the stone."

There would be none of her brother's blood needed, not even a scratch. He was just there to have his presence acknowledged. The Old Gods were jealous Gods, very jealous. They expected those who served them to come to the Glade, preferably with gifts. Jerry hadn't sworn to serve them yet, but his presence now and then was mandatory.

"Come on, walk with me." She said.

Emma knelt in front of the standing stone, with her bother to her right and Ginie to her left. There was always a little offering of her blood, the Gods liked her blood. Usually just a pin prick on one of her fingers, but Emma felt the need for a grand gesture, a display of devotion to the Old Dark Gods. Once it would have left her in pain, with wounds that took days to heal. Now she healed quickly and the ghastly wound would be gone by the morning.

"Taste my blood." She shouted.

There were sharp edges on the standing stones, places where the rain hadn't washed away all the blood, her blood. Pieces of the rough-hewn stones that stuck out and were as sharp as razors. Emma pushed hard and pulled her hand down. No scream, it was important not to scream. The pain was incredible and her hand had to remain there, so the stone could absorb her blood.

"They like your blood." Said Jerry.

Oh, they loved her blood. The real trick was being so useful to them, that the Gods weren't tempted to taste all of it. The standing stone glowed with an intense yellow light and for a brief moment Emma could see them. The Old Gods were there, keeping in the shade of the ageless yew trees of the Glade.

"I bring an offering, a rare soul. A Gidim, a Sumerian... I'm told it was one of the strongest, a highly skilled Etemmu."

Emma placed the soul stone flat against the standing stone, allowing it to pull the soul into itself. The entire Glade went from as bright as a summer day, to as dark as a midwinter night. The branches of the yew trees moved together to form a thick canopy. The Old Gods weren't angry, they were pleased, immensely pleased.

"I bring with me one who is known to you."

She had to shout, a wind had sprung up from nowhere. Emma held Ginie's hand and felt no resistance. Of all the people who'd suffered a brutal and horrific death at the hands of the Old Gods, the vast majority had been punished for showing doubt or hesitancy. Emma took Ginie's hand and cut the tip of her middle finger with a ceremonial knife, before rubbing the few drops of blood over the stone. The stone didn't shine, but there was a definite glow.

"You're accepted here." Said Emma.

Emma stood and looked at where she knew the Gods were standing, watching.

"This one made mistakes, for which she was punished. She now wants to apologise for those mistakes."

Ginie looked up and knew what to say, everything had been rehearsed.

"I humbly apologise." Said Ginie. "I only ask for the opportunity to serve you again."

She might just ask for that, but Emma had other ideas.

"I ask that her face is healed, that your servant is made whole again." Shouted Emma.

Emma had so wanted to ask for a few secrets of transmutation. There were hints of what could be done in the journal of an Etruscan scholar. It might be a long time until she came back with the soul stone filled with such a treasured offering. It was Christmas though and Christmas after all, was the time for giving.

"Angela Maynard will be able to serve you better, if her face is restored." Shouted Emma.

The darkness in the Glade increased, which might mean just about anything. They needed her though, those Old Gods. The darkness became almost complete and Ginie screamed.

"It is as you asked."

The Old Gods muttered in a way that only she could hear.

"Be careful not to ask for too much for those who have angered us."

A warning, but a fair one. Emma had no intention of helping Ginie any further. The last surviving Maynard could sink or swim on her own. If Emma had ever owed her a debt for partly being the cause of her disfigurement, the debt was now paid. The Glade became brighter, though the canopy of branches remained. Every gift of a strong soul, meant the yew trees growing thicker and becoming stronger.

"Oh, your face Aunt Ginie." Said Jerry. "You're beautiful."

Ginie had always looked older than her forty five years, sometimes a lot older. Now her face was healed, she looked ten years younger.

"Yes, he's right.....You are beautiful." Said Emma.

Ginie was feeling her face, but she probably wasn't going to be happy until she'd stood in front of a mirror for a while, maybe hours.

"Thank them Ginie, you must thank them."

Jealous Gods had a need to be appreciated and they had given Ginie a lot to be thankful for. She leant her head gently against the standing stone and thanked the Old Dark Gods for healing her face. By the time they were back with Tommy though, Ginie was going crazy.

"Oh, here I am....Surrounded by men and ghosts. No one who carries a mirror."

"Is this what you want?" Asked Emma.

Of course she'd brought a mirror. Only small, it had come out of a vanity case her mum had bought her when she'd first gone to college. Ginie held it up and moved her face around for several minutes.

"Emma, thank you.....I don't know what to say."

"That's alright...Come on, let's get back to the Copper Kettle and begin the traditional Christmas over indulgence."

Emma was resigned to the fact that she might never understand the transmutation powers of that Etruscan scholar. It was Christmas though and Ginie was happy.

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Happy Christmas everyone!!