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Magus of Stonewylde

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Extract

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Slowly, silently the moon rose over the tower blocks of the city. Patterned with squares of light, the great structures of steel and concrete thrust up into the murky sky. Inside these hives of activity people busied themselves heating up food, watching television, tapping at keyboards.

One girl knew the full moon was rising. She cried for release from her imprisonment; like a moth she battered herself against the unrelenting glass of her cell. As the moon grew smaller overhead, the wildness in her heart slowly died. Silent and still at last, she gazed out into the night. No stars were visible; artificial lights outshone them in the city. Her eyes scanned the skies hoping for one jewel of starlight, but found only the winking orbits of satellites and aeroplanes. She looked down; far below she saw the long snakes of headlights and tail-lights as thousands of workers crawled home. Hope shrivelled and died. She was trapped - there was no escape.

An owl hooted long and low from the dark woods. The boy climbed the hill to the stone at its summit, his boots glittering with frost. His breath billowed in icy clouds about him. He hunkered down with his back against the tall monolith and looked out across the horizon towards the distant sea. The silver moon was riding high, skimming over the landscape. The boy's eyes glinted as he gazed up at the skies where the Milky Way arched like a dusty white rainbow in the darkness. Millions of stars sparkled; bright diamonds flung on the cloak of night.

He sensed the hares further down the hill. Creatures of the full moon, they gathered every month to dance the spirals and gaze in reverence. The boy took a shuddering breath and touched his cheek. The cut had begun to heal, closing over into a thin line that would mark him for life. He shut his eyes and hugged his knees, shivering in the cold night. Up here by the stone on the hill, no-one could touch him. Up here, no-one could hear him cry.

CHAPTER ONE

Sylvie gazed listlessly out of the hospital window at the white aeroplane high up in the sky. Like a great metal bird, she thought, circling over its territory. The ward was full of the usual clatter and she shut her eyes. Two weeks' complete bed rest and observation the doctor had said, as he'd tapped the referral into his computer. They hoped to find out what was wrong with her once and for all.

She'd been ill for some time now, gradually getting worse until her mother was frantic with worry. Stomach pains, headaches, stiff joints, depression, chronic tiredness – Sylvie seemed to have it all. It was some kind of allergy resulting in food intolerances and severe eczema. She'd missed a great deal of school over the past couple of years. She thought of the corridors and classrooms with a shudder. She recalled the smell of the place, the dirty hugeness of it like the lair of a hydra. No sooner had one hideous face been dealt with than two more reared to take its place. Sylvie was the victim of a vicious clique of girls bent on destroying her. She was an easy target, sickly and undeveloped for her age and disfigured with ugly eczema. As she reacted to different foods she grew thinner, seeming to shrink when most girls of her age were growing into women. Her long silver-blonde hair and strange grey eyes ensured that she could never blend in and become one of the crowd. She was the misfit in a teenage society that prized conformity. The more time she spent off school, the harder it was to go back and face the relentless bullying. It had reached the stage where she simply couldn't do it.

Sylvie groaned as the posse of white coats approached. The notes were removed from the end of her bed and the circle of eyes surrounded her. She felt like prey facing a pack of wolves. The alpha male frowned from beneath tufted eyebrows and cast a professional eye over her. She felt less than human under the scrutiny. Her hunted gaze sought out the one friendly face in the crowd. Hazel, the young intern

who'd befriended her in this alien place of drips and needles, winked and gave her a smile.

"Comments?"

"She's responding quite well to treatment, sir. She's put on some weight."

"Clearly intolerant of wheat and dairy foods. Hence the eczema."

"It hasn't even started to clear though, despite the diet. And she's under-developed for her age. She's what – fourteen coming up to fifteen? No sign of menstruation."

"Those of you who've read the case notes thoroughly will know that the mother was concerned about possible anorexia. She's failing to thrive which is a clear indicator."

"What about ME, sir? That would account for the listlessness and inability to engage with any stimulus."

"Mmn, possible but not conclusive. The blood tests show no viral anomalies. There are other allergies too – house dust, pollen, exhaust particles, propellants – she reacts to all the usual allergens. We've now concluded the battery of tests and there's little more we can do for her at the moment."

"It's as if she's given up on life."

All eyes turned to Hazel.

"That's your professional diagnosis, doctor?"

"No, but without the will to thrive, the body starts to shut down. It seems to me Sylvie's rejected everything around her. It's as if she can't cope with any of the stresses of city life. She's become allergic to everything, even the air she breathes."

The consultant pursed his lips at this. He picked up one of Sylvie's wrists and felt her pulse. He ignored the bruising on her thin arm where she'd been punctured by so many needles.

"So purely psychosomatic? Self inflicted and a result of psychological malfunction and a refusal to engage with life?"

Hazel nodded and shot Sylvie a glance of apology.

"A fascinating theory. But in the meantime the medication will continue and her diet will be strictly controlled. We'll discharge her at the end of the week and see what happens. She can always be readmitted if necessary. An interesting case, I'm sure you'll all agree."

Later Hazel came back alone and sat on the bed. She took Sylvie's hand in hers in a gesture very different to the consultant's similar action earlier that day.

"I'm sorry, Sylvie, discussing you like that this morning as if you weren't there."

Sylvie shrugged. Her white face and pale hair against the pillowcase gave her a look of transparency, as if she were slowly dissolving into nothing.

"I meant what I said. Unless you find something to get you excited about life again, you're going to stay like this. Or get worse. Don't you think so?"

Sylvie nodded, turning her strange silver-grey eyes to Hazel's kind ones. She knew that to the young intern she was only a case study, but there was also a genuine warmth and concern about her. She knew that Hazel was almost fully qualified now and would make a compassionate doctor.

"I don't know. I expect you're right. But what is there to get excited about?"

Hazel looked at her with sympathy. She knew a little of Sylvie's background. The girl lived in a tower block in a run-down part of the city, her single mother working full time, the local comprehensive a nightmare. What indeed was there for her to get excited about? Her future looked bleak. Not surprising she'd given up on life.

"Couldn't your mum get a teaching job in the country somewhere? I'm sure fresh air and healthy outdoor living would help you get better."

Sylvie shook her head listlessly.

"We've talked about it. It's too expensive to move and everyone's trying to leave the inner city schools. Jobs in the country are scarce. And Mum's had so much time off in the past couple of years looking after me she'd never get a good reference. So we're stuck here." She was silent a moment, gazing out at the grey clouds. "I'd love to go to the countryside though. I feel trapped in the city, stifled."

"I wish I could take you to Stonewylde with me," said Hazel, squeezing the girl's hand. "It'd be perfect for you."

"Stonewylde? Is that your next hospital after this?"

"No!" laughed Hazel. "It's a country estate in Dorset, where my roots lie. My father was born there and I visit every year. Everything's done in the old fashioned way and the community's self-sufficient. The food's organic and the religion is … different. There are woods, rolling hills, a beach – it's a beautiful place. When I go back every summer I feel whole again, at peace with Mother Earth."

"It sounds wonderful," said Sylvie wistfully. "A place of healing."

"Exactly! Healing for the soul as well as the body. You'd love it, Sylvie. It's strange; when I first saw you in here I thought maybe you were Hallfolk."

"Hallfolk? What's that?"

"The people who live up at the Hall at Stonewylde. You look so similar. Your silvery hair … lots of us Hallfolk have very blond hair, and something about your face. I don't know … it made me wonder. I've seen your mum's red hair. Do you get your blondness from your father?"

"I don't know anything about my father. Mum refuses to talk about him. She had me very young. There's some dark secret she won't discuss. My grandparents disowned her after she refused to have me adopted, so I can't even ask them."

"That's terrible! Well, whatever your parentage you do look remarkably like one of us. I wonder if it would be possible to arrange a stay for you."

When she saw Sylvie's face light up, Hazel knew she shouldn't have mentioned the idea.

"Hold on, Sylvie. I can't promise anything. Outsiders are never allowed into Stonewylde. But Magus is in town next week and I'll speak to him, see what I can do. Please don't get excited though. He'll most likely say no."

"Is Magus the owner?"

"Actually, no, the estate belongs to his half-brother. But Magus is … well, the kind of lord of the manor, the master. He's the most amazing man."

Sylvie noticed the sparkle in her eyes.

"Are you in love with him, Hazel?" she teased.

Hazel smiled dreamily and patted her hand.

"If you met him you'd understand. Everyone loves Magus and I'm no exception. I'm so excited about the summer."

"Is that when you're visiting?"

"More than that. I'll be qualified then. I'm to be the doctor at Stonewylde for a year."

"That's wonderful! Oh please, Hazel, please try to persuade him to let me visit, even if it's only for a weekend. I'm sure Mum could scrape the train fare together. It sounds like heaven on earth."

"I'll do my best. And you're right; Stonewylde is heaven on earth."

Miranda, Sylvie's mother, was not impressed when her daughter related this conversation at visiting time. She was exhausted, having travelled half way across London from the school where she taught, and now facing another long, cold journey back home to the empty flat when this visit was over. She surveyed Sylvie's excited face with dismay.

"You mustn't raise your hopes, Sylvie. It'll probably come to nothing. Besides, I don't know if I could even manage the cost of train tickets at the moment. They've put up the tube fares again and now my overdraft's bigger than ever. And I don't think the doctor should've been talking to you like this anyway. It's very unprofessional."

"She's not unprofessional! She's the only nice person here. I'm not raising my hopes, Mum. But wouldn't it be wonderful to visit a country estate? I've heard Dorset is beautiful. Maybe we could go in the Easter holidays?"

"We'll see. Let's wait till the doctor has spoken to this man – Magus was it? Strange name. It does sound a little whacky to me, Sylvie. We don't want to get involved in some sort of cult thing, do we? Cut off from the rest of society in darkest Dorset, old farming methods, a weird religion too, you said? I don't like the sound of it."

"Oh Mum! Keep an open mind, you've always told me that. And Hazel asked about my father. She said …"

"That's none of her business!" snapped Miranda, cheeks flaming. "How dare she?"

"No, not like that, Mum. Why are you always so

defensive about it? It's my blond hair. She thought I might come from this place, Stonewylde. She only wondered if …"

"Well it's not her place to speculate on your background. That's put me off the whole idea, if people there are going to start asking questions about your father."

"Mum, why are you always so prickly about it?"

"It's a closed subject, Sylvie. You know that."

"But why? Surely I have a right to know who my father is. I'm old enough now, aren't I?"

"I don't talk about it because it's sordid and unpleasant. It's all in the past which is where I want it to stay. And as to having a right to know who he was – I'd like to know that myself. I never did catch his name."

Yul leant his forehead against the softness of the stallion's coat, breathing in his sweet smell. He was so tired he could have fallen asleep where he stood. Nightwing snickered and turned his head to pluck at the boy with gentle lips. Wearily Yul opened his eyes and resumed grooming. This was the one highlight of his punishment. Nobody normally got this close to Magus' horse unless they were an experienced stable hand.

"Come on, lad. You've done enough for tonight. Go on home to your bed now."

Tom, the head ostler, stood outside the half door. He shook his head.

"Never seen anything like it afore. That horse is always evil with strangers. But he's taken a real shine to you."

Yul nodded. He too felt the affinity between himself and Nightwing. He wished that he could ride the horse.

Tom watched as the boy put away the grooming brushes and the tack he'd polished. He was strong and willing despite having already put in a full day's work in the woods; Tom would be sorry to see the back of him now that the week was up. He still didn't understand why Yul had been sent here every evening. When he'd asked the boy what misdemeanour he'd committed, Yul had merely shrugged and mumbled something about not showing enough respect. Tom knew the boy's reputation – surly and rebellious. But he also knew the

boy's father. Tom had seen the cut on Yul's cheek, which was Magus' style. The master could be a little free with his riding whip. But the bruise on the other cheek, the way the boy winced as he moved – that was surely Alwyn's doing.

"You've worked hard here, lad, and I'll make sure Magus hears about it. I don't know how you got yourself into this trouble but mind you don't do it again."

Yul gazed at the older man through his dark curls and nodded. What could he say? He didn't know how he got into such trouble either. He seemed to have a death wish at times.

"Well, mind my words, Yul. And come up again to see us. But keep out of the master's way, eh? And your father's too."

Yul grinned at him, raised a dirty hand in farewell and trudged off into the night, melting into the darkness. The ostler shook his head, wondering what was to become of such a boy. He began to shut the horses up for the night and was surprised to see the gleam of blond hair in the lantern light as Magus appeared in the stable courtyard.

"Has the boy gone already?"

"Aye, sir. He was asleep on his feet."

"Pity you let him go. I wanted a final word with him."

"The lad was worn out, sir."

"Hard work never hurt anyone. I hope he's learnt his lesson. I won't have anyone slope off from their duties. Can you believe it? I found the boy lying up in the fields watching hares when Greenbough thought he was clearing undergrowth!"

"He worked well whilst he was here, sir. He has a way with the horses, right enough."

"Yes, too much of a way. Whilst I was reprimanding him for idling about in the sun, he had the temerity to stroke Nightwing. Nobody touches my horse – everyone knows that. The boy's lucky I let him off so lightly."

Tom thought it best not to mention that he'd allowed Yul to groom Nightwing.

"Aye, sir. I'm sure he's been put in his place now. I reckon his father's had a go at him too."

"I'm pleased to hear it. There's something in that boy that

needs taming. A look in his eye I don't like. I'll be watching him closely this year as he approaches sixteen. He'd better not overstep the mark again."

Yul flung himself onto his narrow bed, too tired to wash. He was exhausted, unable even to undress. He kicked off his boots as he lay on the old bedcovers. The tiny room was unlit for his mother didn't like him and his sister Rosie using lanterns; their attic rooms were right under the thatch. He pushed open the small window next to his face, the slope of the roof preventing him from sitting upright. He breathed deeply of the night air and listened to the owls calling across the darkness. The pub down the lane began to disgorge the men. Their voices seemed loud in the silent, starry night as they said their goodnights and made their way to their cottages. Yul heard his father whistling as he came up the lane. He shuddered, his body instinctively curling up. The front door opened and closed and he heard his mother's soft voice. His father's voice was only a low murmur so she must have persuaded him to sit down in his chair and have a bite of bread and cheese. Yul's mouth watered at the thought of food. He'd burnt up extra energy all week and was constantly hungry.

Yul imagined his father now, stretched out in his armchair, feet warming by the fire. The cider could make him magnanimous but more often he became irritable and even aggressive. Alwyn very rarely hit his wife or the other children; he shouted and bellowed but their fear usually mollified him. It was a different matter with Yul. Just the sight of the boy could set him off, picking an argument over nothing and sometimes not even bothering with any pretext. He'd always been strict to the point of harshness, but over the past year or so as Yul started the transition from boy to man, it had developed into something much worse. Yul was often very frightened, although it had become a matter of honour not to show it. Instead he took whatever his father chose to dish out, all the while holding on to the thought that one day he'd be big enough to stand up to him. Yul fell asleep with this in mind, and dreamed that he and Nightwing were flying through the

black sky, the moonlight on their faces and the wind in their manes.

Miranda's relief at Sylvie's slight improvement during her stay in hospital was marred by a new worry. Sylvie talked incessantly of Hazel's country home and how she longed to escape the city to walk in the hills and woods of Stonewylde. For all she wanted her daughter to recover from the debilitating illness, Miranda hoped that the proposed visit to Dorset would come to nothing. The last thing she needed was an expensive trip that may only make Sylvie worse. But her hopes were dashed when she went to collect Sylvie from hospital a few days later.

"Thank goodness I caught you before you left," cried the young doctor, approaching breathlessly. "Good news! Magus is in London. I've talked to him and he wants to meet you both!"

Sylvie lit up, showing more animation than she had for several months.

"Can we come to Stonewylde for a visit then? Is it okay?"

"I don't know. But it sounds promising; I thought he'd reject the idea out of hand." Hazel turned to Miranda, her face glowing with excitement. "I'm sorry, I know this must seem terribly unorthodox but I honestly believe that a stay at Stonewylde could help Sylvie. We've tried all the drugs and creams, the medicines and treatments. Nothing seems to cure her because I think her illness goes deeper than that. She needs spiritual healing more than anything else. Please give this a try. I'm sure you won't regret it."

The look on Miranda's face was almost comical. Spiritual healing! The place was probably full of weirdos, herbal remedies and crystals. But she shrugged in resignation, not wanting to be the one to crush the excitement from Sylvie's thin face.

"Thank you, Doctor. We'll come and meet him at least and take it from there."

The meeting was not at all how Miranda imagined. Hazel picked them up a few days later and drove them to Magus'

offices in the heart of the City. The building was very grand and they were ushered in by an immaculate P.A. She hid any curiosity the tired woman and her disfigured daughter may have aroused behind a mask of professional welcome. Magus' office was luxurious and the man himself a complete shock to both of them. Instead of the crusty landed gentry type in tweeds and brogues whom Sylvie had envisaged, or the bearded oddball in ethnic clothing and sandals of Miranda's imaginings, here was the most attractive man either of them had ever seen. In his late thirties, with ash blond hair and velvet dark eyes, he was tall and long-limbed and wore an expensive business suit with effortless style. His face was strong and chiselled; his manner charming and quietly powerful. Miranda rapidly changed her opinion of the whole venture. This was no weird cult leader bent on brain washing them for his evil ends, but a wealthy and educated man. Maybe Stonewylde would be a similarly attractive proposition.

He put Miranda and Sylvie at ease, for they were flustered and a little shy. Like Hazel, whom he dismissed once she'd introduced them, he was fascinated by Sylvie's likeness to the residents of Stonewylde. He couldn't take his eyes off her and apologised with a smile. He told them about the great estate and the way of life there. He asked them many questions about their lives and was concerned to hear of Sylvie's illness and allergies. He questioned her sensitively, his dark eyes showing sympathy and understanding when she hesitatingly explained her problems. She could feel genuine warmth in the way he smiled at her, giving her the confidence to speak about such personal matters. He also wanted to know about Miranda's teaching career and her hopes for the future. When he learnt that they didn't extend beyond finding a cure for Sylvie, he nodded.

"Your ideals would fit in well with our philosophy at Stonewylde," he said in his deep voice. "We too put health and well-being before material gain. Forgive me for asking but what about Sylvie's father? I assume he's not part of your lives?"

Miranda refused to be drawn and Sylvie felt embarrassed

by her curtness on the subject.

"I only ask because of the striking resemblance between Sylvie and members of my family," he said gently. "We're an extended family and many of us don't live at Stonewylde. I wondered whether Sylvie's father could be a relation. I didn't mean to intrude."

He explained about the education system there, with a school at the Hall for the more able and academic pupils and another in the Village for those destined for practical jobs on the estate. He switched on a data projector and showed photos taken around the estate. As Sylvie gazed at the images she felt a deep longing begin to take root. She was sure she'd regain her health if she could stay there, even if only for a few days. Magus then rang for tea and said he had a proposition to make. He told them he was impressed with Miranda's values and sorry for Sylvie's suffering when she was clearly such a bright and sensitive girl. There happened to be a teaching position available, and he offered Miranda a post at the school in the Hall teaching English to the senior students, with a place at the school for Sylvie too. Accommodation, food and essentials would be included along with a modest salary. The position would initially be for a year with the option to make it permanent if both sides were agreeable. Magus would negotiate with Miranda's current school to waive her notice and they could move down in the middle of March. He'd give them a week to think about it.

He sat back on the sofa and watched them, his dark eyes gleaming at their reaction to his thunderbolt. Miranda was flushed and dumbfounded. She looked across at Sylvie and knew what her answer must be; their present lifestyle was slowly killing her daughter. They had nothing to lose. She smiled reassuringly at Sylvie, feeling the same bubbling exhilaration and sense of unreality herself.

"I don't need a week, Magus. I can give you our answer now. We'd both love to come to Stonewylde."

"I was hoping you'd say that," he said softly. "You won't regret it."

The next days passed in a blur of activity for there was

much to do, but the night before their departure Sylvie found it difficult to sleep. She lay on her familiar bed for the last time, gazing up at the sodium-lit night sky, where the red and green lights of aircraft flew overhead to unknown destinations. But nowhere could be more exciting than her destination. At last she was to escape this prison and find the peace and beauty she craved. Miranda too found it impossible to fall asleep despite the gruelling day she'd spent packing the last of their things. She hoped that she'd made the right decision and was besieged now by last minute doubts. Then she remembered how kind Magus had been. He knew they were alone in the world and how ill Sylvie was. He'd take care of them. Feeling comforted by that thought she finally slept. But her sleep was haunted by the ghost of her past. The memory replayed itself for the thousandth time, buried firmly during the day but using the dark night, as she slept, to rise from the grave.

A great red harvest moon was rising in the clear night. The autumn air was crisp and fragrant as she obediently followed the man through the woods leading away from the house. The party was in full swing behind her but she welcomed the cool darkness ahead. She thrilled with excitement. Just fifteen and immature for her age, she was strictly controlled by old-fashioned parents, dragged along to this charity fancy dress party hosted by her father's business associate. She should have been demurely sipping lemonade at her mother's side. Instead she was creeping off into the woods with a tall stranger, tipsy on a glass of punch and not caring what happened next.

In a clearing amongst the trees the man with the pale hair and feathered bird mask stopped. He gazed up through the branches at the red moon in the sky, enormous and unreal. Then he gently pulled her down onto the carpet of fallen leaves and damp grass. He spread her long red hair about her head, creating a fiery halo on the earth. She started to protest as his hands touched her and he murmured deeply, hushing her first with his voice and then with a hand over her mouth. His masked eyes bored into hers, but as he entered her, he flung back his head and stared long and hard at the blood red moon. The sound that escaped his lips was as primitive as a wolf's howl.