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Solstice at Stonewylde

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Published by Moongazy Publishing

Extract

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Ghostly wreaths of mist clung to the great stones, partially obscuring the sinister images painted all around. Black crows with outstretched wings, leering white skulls, grinning Jack o' Lanterns; the emblems of Samhain loomed ominously. Two old women, grimy shawls clutched tightly around them, entered the Stone Circle. Black feathers and white bones hung from the branches of elder that arched over the entrance to the sacred space, brushing their whiskery faces as they shuffled beneath the archway. It was silent and eerie inside the Circle and the sisters surveyed the menacing scene with grim approval. A labyrinth delineated by smooth black stones was laid out on the soft earth. The ancient cursal pattern filled the area, and the path it marked led to the centre where a great pyre had been built. The women hobbled across to the Altar Stone, decorated with boughs of yew. A great crow painted on the stone above looked down at the black cauldron sitting on the altar, squat and baleful.

The crones lit cracked clay pipes, puffing contentedly at the stinking smoke. They both took a good swig of cloudy liquid from an old glass bottle and smacked their lips with satisfaction.

"'Twill be strange, sister, both our boys here with us tomorrow."

"Aye, you speak right. Blessed be that Magus fetched Jackdaw home, his banishment over. My own dear son back again."

"Things'll change now. Magus brung him back to deal with the brat. Dark Angel didn't want the boy up on Mooncliffe at Hunter's Moon. But tomorrow, sister, at Samhain! Magus must have a clear path. Stop the boy interfering with the moongazy maiden. Magus needs her magic, like his father afore him with that Raven. Hah!"

They cackled hoarsely at the memory of Raven.

"Moongazy as they come but didn't save her, did it? Nought but a pile o' ash under the Yew! Old Heggy got it wrong there."

They spat in unison, then knocked their pipes against the stone.

"Work to be done now, sister. Best get on with it. We need to be ready for tomorrow night, when the Angel comes a-walking in the Stone Labyrinth. When the Dark Angel comes looking for his own."

CHAPTER ONE

Magus strode purposefully along the Tudor gallery leading to the rooms at the end. He had much to do, with the festival so close, and no time to waste today.

"You're not still in bed!" he said irritably. He stood with Miranda in the girl's bedroom gazing down at Sylvie as she lay against the pillows, white and exhausted. She pointedly looked away, refusing to meet his eyes or answer him.

"You should be up and about by now, young lady," he continued. "A week in bed is more than enough. Don't you agree, Miranda?"

"I'm not sure if she's quite ready yet," said her mother. "She's still very weak. Look at the shadows under her eyes."

"Rubbish!" said Magus firmly. "Remember that I know best in these matters. I've warned you that Sylvie is prone to malingering and attention seeking. It's Samhain tomorrow and she should be preparing for the festival along with everyone else. This is all put on - she's absolutely fine. Leave us now, Miranda. I want to speak with her alone."

Reluctantly Miranda left the room and Sylvie struggled to sit up. She stared hard at him, her eyes pools of icy water in her white face.

"I'm not putting it on," she said in a small voice.

"You're being pathetic, Sylvie," he said tersely. "All you did was stand on a rock for a few hours. I can't understand why you're making such a fuss over nothing."

"I'm not making a fuss over nothing! You know what I went through that night! You had no right to do that to me. How could you be so cruel? I'm not doing it next month. I won't let you take my moon magic ever again."

Magus's lips tightened into a hard, white line and he sat

down on the bed next to her. He leant forward and pushed his face close to hers, black eyes glittering.

"You'll do exactly as I tell you," he said in a voice of steel. "Everyone else does and you're no exception. You know full well why you were brought to Stonewylde and what I need from you. You will go to Mooncliffe every month for as long as I want."

Sylvie closed her eyes, trying to summon the strength to stand up to him.

"I won't," she whispered. "I'll leave Stonewylde rather than go on that rock for you again."

He chuckled at this and reaching out, gently stroked the hair back from her face. She flinched at his touch but was unable to move away.

"No, you won't leave Stonewylde, Sylvie. Your mother's expecting my baby and she'll never leave. You wouldn't abandon them here, surely, wondering how they'd cope with my anger and displeasure. To say nothing of what I'd do to your sweetheart Yul. You will stay here for their sakes. And you'll do exactly what I want."

Sylvie stared at him helplessly through a mist of tears. She had no energy to fight. He continued to brush the hair off her forehead. The feel of his sure fingers made her skin crawl.

"Is Yul alright?" she whispered, vaguely recalling his dramatic arrival at the moonrise but unaware of what had happened to him after that.

"No, not really," he laughed. He stood up and looked down at her with a pitiless smile. "And by the time I've finished with him, he'll never be alright again."

"I hate you," she whispered, even more softly. "I really hate you."

Magus laughed again and then called her mother back in. He put his arm around Miranda, his other hand resting proprietarily on her swollen belly.

"Sylvie is to get up now. She's not ill. She's just wallowing in self-pity. She's far too keen on playing the martyr, expecting us all to run around after her. Get her out of bed now and make her eat. Do you understand me, Miranda?"

"Yes, Magus, whatever you say. You know best."

He smiled and patted her stomach.

"Yes, I do. Make sure she's ready for Samhain. That's an order, Miranda. I want her down in the Village tomorrow and taking part in the festival. This attention seeking behaviour is going to stop as from now."

The Village Green was alive with activity as Magus trotted along the cobbles. He reined Nightwing in, holding the black stallion in check as he surveyed the scene before him. The Green Labyrinth was almost complete. Scorched lines marked the pattern on the grass, which was picked out further with white pebbles interspersed with tiny candles in coloured glass jars. In the centre of the seven coiled labyrinth the Villagers had build a large wicker dome, and many people were busy now adding the finishing touches. Tomorrow the labyrinth would be the spiritual focus for the day's events.

Magus swung the horse around and urged him towards the open doors of the Great Barn. Peering in, he nodded with satisfaction at the preparations taking place. The ancient building was decorated in the same manner as the Stone Circle, with black birds, skulls and Jack o' Lanterns. Twigs of the elder tree and slips of yew hung all around the walls and rafters, tokens of the trees sacred to Samhain. The elder was the tree of the crone, the waning and dark face of the Triple Moon Goddess. The yew was the tree of death and regeneration. The elder was thought to guard the gates to the Otherworld and the dark mysteries of the dead. All around were emblems of death, and Magus smiled grimly. Death was exactly what he had in mind for the ashen-faced boy lying up in the byre. Yul had led a charmed life, thanks to that meddling old crone. But maybe this Samhain her binding spell could be side-stepped. Maybe at last the Dark Angel himself would intervene to break her spell of protection for the brat.

He wheeled Nightwing around and trotted down one of the lanes radiating like spokes of a web away from the Village Green. He'd already visited three of the families involved, and had one more call to make this morning. Maizie saw the tall

figure of Magus through a window and hurriedly opened her door. She'd been worried ever since receiving a message from Magus the day after the Hunter Moon. He'd informed her that he was keeping her son up at the Hall for a few days following an incident with Sylvie at Mooncliffe. The implication was that Yul had committed a serious misdemeanour. Maizie's heart had sunk at this news, and she now greeted Magus with some trepidation. He dwarfed the cottage parlour. His head brushed the beams as he gazed down at the anxious woman before him.

Despite seven children and a brute of a husband, he recognised the spark in her that had so attracted him all those years ago. The dark curls and slanted grey eyes, the rosy cheeks that burned now with aroused emotion, just as they had once done for entirely different reasons. Her dimples were the same, and her proud chin. He shook his head to dispel the memories and sat down in an armchair, indicating that she too should sit. A little girl came running in from the kitchen, freezing when she saw the grand figure of the master of Stonewylde seated unexpectedly in her home.

"Blessings!" he smiled, and held out a welcoming hand. Shyly she approached and he lifted her onto his lap. He looked down at her pointed little face and ruffled her dark curls gently.

"She's so like you, Maizie," he said. "Not in Nursery yet? Or do you like to keep her at home with you?"

"She won't be three till Imbolc, sir," replied Maizie. "Time enough then for Nursery."

"Nearly three years? Doesn't time fly?"

"Like a crow, straight and true. Have you come to tell me, sir, what's happened to Yul?"

"No, Maizie. I wished to speak to you about your husband. I think that …"

"But what about my boy, sir? When will he be coming home?"

"I'll be keeping him at the Hall for a little longer."

"I don't wish to be disrespectful, sir, but last time you had Yul up at the Hall back in Midsummer you nearly killed him. Whatever he's done, surely he don't deserve that?"

Magus looked deep into her eyes and remembered how he'd once felt about this woman, only a girl then. There'd been women aplenty, but this one was different. She'd been with him all through that long spring and summer. He'd worked himself to the bone, struggling to rescue Stonewylde from the slough of neglect that was the legacy of his father, uncle and grandfather. Three bad masters in a row, and the very fabric of Stonewylde almost torn apart by their laziness and greed. It was a daunting task for the young, idealistic man who'd abandoned his burgeoning career in the Outside World to return home and put things to rights. Maizie had been his saviour that year. Her vivacious prettiness and uncomplicated sense of fun had been the only light in those dark days of endless labour. His ray of warmth right up until the Winter Solstice, when everything had fallen apart so cataclysmically.

He sighed and smiled sadly at her.

"Now, Maizie, you must trust me on this. We both know that Yul is wilful, disobedient and a complete troublemaker. That's why poor Alwyn had such a difficult time with him over the years. It can't have been easy bringing up a son as rebellious as Yul."

Maizie regarded him steadily, also remembering the past. She'd once loved this man so desperately. Part of her would always love him. She took a deep breath.

"We both know, sir, that Yul is no son of Alwyn's. Now that the man's ill and not likely to recover, we can speak openly. After all this time, surely you can acknowledge the boy as your own."

There was silence in the small parlour. Magus's black eyes glittered dangerously. He tapped his whip against his boot, mouth tight with displeasure.

"I thought we'd agreed never to discuss this subject? The matter was dealt with years ago. You were already pregnant at the time of that Moon Fullness up at Mooncliffe. If I'd known that, I'd never have taken you up there that night. Nor carried on with you all summer and autumn. I don't make love to women already pregnant by another man. You deceived me, Maizie. You even admitted it just before your Handfasting

with Alwyn. Yul is not my son."

She gave him a hard stare, then looked away, her cheeks burning fiercely.

"I was not pregnant then and you know it. Anything I admitted was because 'twas forced out of me. I'd never lain with anyone other than you, not till after Yul was born. You and I both know that night of the eclipse was my first time. And we both know right enough why you've denied Yul all these years. But Mother Heggy's just a mad old biddy and you should never have taken heed of her foolish words."

"It was nothing to do with that, Maizie."

"You know 'twas! And because of it, you condemned me to a life of misery with Alwyn. And condemned your own son to suffering beyond belief!"

"You're wrong, Maizie. I …"

"No I'm not! All these long years I've kept quiet! All these years I've held my tongue and stood by silently. Had to, because of Alwyn. But he's not around any more and at last I can speak plain. Any fool can see Yul's yours."

"Yul's nothing like me! He has dark hair and grey eyes."

"Yes, he gets those from me. But he has your build and height, your way of moving and riding, your hands, your eyebrows and cheekbones – I could go on for ever. He's clever like you, determined, quick witted and so strong willed. He won't be told what to do unless he wants to do it. And he has your temper."

"Maizie, you're all of those things too. You're strong minded and bright. And he was born eight months after the eclipse up at Mooncliffe. That was our first time together. So you obviously conceived before then."

"No! He came a month early! 'Tis not that unusual! Would I have been up at the Stone Circle for the Midwinter Solstice if he'd been due then? I thought I had another month to go! I was as shocked as anyone when he was born up there during the ceremony, with me squatting on the earth while everyone looked on, and Mother Heggy capering about and laying him on the Altar Stone all bloody and screaming. Not the best way of birthing your first child. And not expected

neither."

She stared angrily at Magus, her nostrils flaring and grey eyes flashing. He was reminded forcibly of the boy who now lay like death up in the byre, for this was just how Yul looked when he was angry. He knew that Yul would have been a worthy son, someone to groom as his heir, as the future magus. The boy had courage, pride and leadership qualities. He was tough and intelligent and passionate about Stonewylde. But since Yul's birth he'd been haunted by Mother Heggy's prophecies. By acknowledging the boy as his own, he would surely be opening up the possibility of their truth? *Conceived under a red moon, born under a blue one, the fruit of his passion. This child would one day rise up with the folk behind him to overthrow him at the place of bones and death*. He'd woken in the middle of many a night in cold, sweating panic. The thought of a child of his growing up at Stonewylde, whose destiny it was to destroy him, was like something from a Greek tragedy.

He shook his head and once more denied his paternity, hoping as always to thus negate the prophecy. He looked across at the pretty woman before him, his face implacable.

"I'm sorry, Maizie, but you're wrong. I shall be very displeased if you continue to make these false allegations. Yul remains at the Hall whilst I investigate his latest insubordination. I'll deal with him exactly as I see fit. I am the magus and it isn't for you to question the punishment I choose to administer. So keep your remarks to yourself. I'll hear no more about it. You'd do well to remember your place."

"I'm sorry, sir," she said, lowering her eyes, although her anger was palpable. She was still so attractive; he always had preferred women with spirit. He glanced down at the child sitting silently in his lap. She gazed up at him with enormous green eyes that seemed to search his soul.

"Bad man," she said clearly. "Bad, bad man."

"Leveret, come here!" said Maizie sharply. Magus handed the tiny girl over to her mother.

"The matter I actually came here to speak about is Alwyn. You know there's been no improvement following the stroke? He's still alive but he can do nothing for himself and doesn't

seem to be aware of anything. He's shrunk to skin and bones and has to be forcibly fed. I wanted to ask if you were in agreement to Alwyn entering the Stone Labyrinth this Samhain for the Dance of Death. I personally think he should go, but as his nearest relative you have the final say. You know the custom. Permission can only be granted by the closest member of the family."

She took another deep breath to calm herself. If there was one thing Maizie had learnt from living with Alwyn all those years, it was self control. She nodded.

"Yes, I agree he should go. Let the Dark Angel decide. 'Tis the best way."

"Good," he said, smiling briskly. "I'll arrange for it to be done. Well, I must be off."

They both rose and he gazed down at her as she stood before him, Leveret on her hip. His dark eyes softened and he took one of her hands.

"Maizie, let's not spoil things between us now. Not after all this time and all that's happened. You've always been special to me. You were such a lovely girl and you're a fine woman."

She frowned at him and removed her hand from his.

"Thank you for calling on me, sir. Samhain Blessings to you."

By mid-morning the next day the heavy mist had once again lifted, although the day was overcast and grey. Children ran around the Village excitedly, desperate to get on with the festivities. Every fire in the Village had been extinguished and everyone must fast until the feast in the evening. The trees encircling the Green had already shed their leaves, victims of a gusty storm that had raged the day after the full moon. They'd now taken on their skeletal winter appearance. The remains of the messy rooks' nests had blown away too in the south-westerly gales. Only the great yew remained clothed in glossy dark-green, its slips like the barbs of a bird's feather. It was the last day of the pagan year. It was the day of ending the old. It was the day of death.

In the morning the Samhain drama prepared by the young people was acted out in the Great Barn. It was a spectacular event, full of dance and music with everyone masked and costumed. Sylvie hadn't taken part, feeling far too weak; she'd missed all the rehearsals anyway. Magus noticed her absence and at mid-day left the festivities to summon her from the Hall. She sat now in the jolting cart beside her mother, huddled miserably in her black cloak. This was her first time outside since the night of the Moon Fullness over a week ago. She hadn't wanted to come, but Magus had stormed into their rooms. He'd insisted that she go immediately to the Village to take part in the afternoon and evening ceremonies. He'd become very angry when she'd refused. Miranda hadn't batted an eyelid when he'd slapped Sylvie hard, shouting at her and throwing clothes at her to put on. Her mother had merely looked on as he dragged her, crying and struggling, out of the rooms and downstairs. He'd bundled her towards the waiting horse and cart, his one concession to her weakness.

"Behave yourself, girl!" he'd hissed menacingly into her face, dumping her on the seat in the back of the cart. "I told you yesterday you were to take part in the festival. There's nothing wrong with you. Snap out of it and stop being so pathetic!"

Shivering in her cloak, she tried now to stop the sobs that escaped every so often. She felt ill and weak, but a dull anger burned inside her.

Then Sylvie realised it was Tom sitting in front holding the reins and she managed to pull herself together. Once Magus had ridden on ahead, she leant forward and whispered to the ostler.

"Tom, do you have any news of Yul? Is he alright?"

The old man turned and gazed down at her in consternation. He was unsure of how honest to be, for this poor girl looked little better than the boy. But she deserved the truth.

"I'm not to speak of it, but reckon you won't spread the word and get me into trouble. So no, miss, Yul's not alright at all. He's alive, and that's a miracle in itself, but he's in a bad

way. He can't stand nor barely sit and he can't take no food. I done what I can, and Mother Heggy's sent potions. But … well, 'tis not looking good."

"What did they do to him?" she whispered, closing her eyes in anguish at the thought of Yul suffering. "Was he whipped again?"

"Why no, miss, they done nothing to him. He was brung up to the Hall the day after the Moon Fullness. That Jackdaw carried him into the byre like a brace o' rabbits slung over his shoulders. I reckon Yul's been poisoned. His eyes aren't right. He don't know who he is or nothing."

Miranda pulled her back onto the seat.

"What are you whispering about, Sylvie? Don't talk with the servants like that. You know Magus wouldn't like it."

Sylvie glared at her. Even with the hypnosis, she couldn't understand how her mother could behave like this.

"All you ever think about is Magus. How could you have let him hit me just now, Mum? *You've* never hit me. You always said it was wrong. Don't you care about me any more?"

Miranda looked away uncomfortably.

"Of course I do. But Magus is right. You can't just take to your bed for half the month. If you insist on dancing on that cliff, you'll have to put up with feeling tired afterwards. And he didn't hit you. It was just a little slap."

"That's not true! Why do you always take his side?"

"Because he knows best. He says I've been too soft with you all these years and I think maybe he's right. We have to obey him, you know that. Please don't be difficult, darling. It makes life so unpleasant and I don't want to make him angry. I have the baby to think about, after all."

Sylvie turned her back on her mother, seething with outrage. When they reached the Village, Tom helped them out of the cart and Sylvie managed to whisper to him again.

"If you get the chance, tell Yul I love him. Please, Tom?"

"Aye, miss, I will that."

Sylvie stood shivering at the entrance to the Green

Labyrinth marked out on the Village Green, waiting her turn to go in. Her face was so white and thin that she hardly needed a skull mask. She pulled the thick black cloak tightly around her. The atmosphere on the Green today frightened her. It was so different from the joyous maypole dancing at Beltane or the holiday fun of the Summer Solstice. Everyone she saw today wore a hooded black robe or cloak and many wore skull masks. A thin line of smoke trickled from the wicker dome in the centre of the labyrinth, but the cottages seemed strangely lifeless without their habitual plumes of smoke. It was quiet too, despite the many people thronging around the cobbles. She wanted very much to cling on to Miranda, who stood nearby. But that was out of the question given Miranda's earlier remarks. Her mother had made it very clear where her priorities now lay. Sylvie felt vulnerable and alone.

A man wearing a crow mask stood at the arch of elder branches, identical to the one up at the Stone Circle. He let young people into the sacred space nine at a time, one by one. As Sylvie's group waited, he reminded them of the significance of what they were about to do. This was a pilgrimage and time of deep meditation. The walk through the labyrinth was symbolic, representing the journey towards death. When they entered the dome in the centre they entered the Otherworld, the Realm of the Dead. They shed their past life and lay in the Otherworld, reflecting on what they'd discarded and left behind. Then they were reborn from the dark womb and began a new life, a new journey starting afresh as they retraced their steps and followed the path out of the maze. Sylvie watched the children already in there. They walked very slowly, guided by the white pebbles as they followed the symmetrical, tortuously curved path. They kept their heads bowed as they walked, making sure they kept the distance between them until they reached the entrance to the dome.

Sylvie didn't want to enter the labyrinth. The whole thing was macabre. She swayed on her feet at the entrance. She'd barely eaten all week and couldn't shake off the overwhelming exhaustion that smothered her. She knew Hazel had put her on a drip for the first few days; her arm was still bruised. Her

legs were shaky and her stomach hollow. She wanted to cry as she surveyed the great coiled labyrinth ahead. There was nothing on the path to hold on to if she felt faint. She wanted to cry at Magus' harshness towards her. It was all his fault. He'd put her through the terrible ordeal up at Mooncliffe. She couldn't help being slow to recover after feeding him her moon magic. She'd never be able to take this every month. She looked across to the wicker dome in the centre and hoped she'd make it that far without collapsing.

"This is a very solemn journey," continued the crow man. "'Tis not one to be undertaken lightly. As you walk towards your death, take stock of the past year and all that you've done. Have you achieved all you hoped for? Have you made mistakes or failed in your intent? When you are inside the Otherworld, confront your weaknesses, your failures. Then clear your minds and savour the darkness. In the dome you'll be given a drink, symbolic of the blood of death and the blood of birth. When you emerge newly born, remove your death mask and with a bright face look to the New Year ahead. As you walk back along the path, think hard on what you hope to achieve this coming year, on what you can do for Stonewylde, for our community. Think of our Magus and all that he does for us. Try to be like him, giving of your time and energy willingly for the sake of Stonewylde and the folk who live here. You'll be given a slip of yew as you finish the journey to remind you of your rebirth. May the Dance of the Green Labyrinth at Samhain be sacred to you all."

As the gate opened and the group began to move forward, Sylvie glanced across and saw the tall black-robed figure of Magus staring intently at her. His face was impassive but his dark eyes burned into her. She shuddered and stepped under the arch of elder, the black feathers brushing her white face.

"Pull your mask down!" hissed the crow man, bundling her in and blocking the exit behind her.