

MOONDANCE
of
STONEWYLDE

The Second Novel of Stonewylde

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A crone hunched stiffly on the dirty flagstone floor of a tumbledown cottage, crooning her incantation. The circle of salt around her was marked at five points with stubs of candle and symbols of the elements. A large leather-bound book lay open by her side, the spidery writing faded on the parchment. The glossy crow sat in her lap with eyes shut.

With a shrivelled hand Mother Heggy took a pinch of dried essence from a dish and sprinkled it onto the twigs smouldering in the little fire-cauldron. Foul-smelling smoke billowed up into the air and hung in wreathes about her. Her other clawed hand clamped around something soft and malleable, something vaguely human in shape, fashioned from wax, pig fat and a few ginger hairs. In the centre of this mommet lay a strange heart: a crescent of toenail.

Smoke choked the tiny cottage and the crow fidgeted in the crone's lap. Her mumbling invocation gathered in power. She scraped the few remaining desiccated flakes from the dish into the fire. This was all that was left, after her cake-baking, of the concoction she'd prepared one Dark Moon as the boy had sat here, his body battered and his heart seething with dark hatred. The mommet became softer in the warmth from her leathery skin as the energy was transferred.

She uttered the final words, no longer legible in her Book of Shadows but known in her heart. She traced the five-pointed shape of magic in the smoke about her and, with a cry, pitched the tiny figure into the pot-belly of the cauldron. It hit the burning twigs and instantly the pig fat turned to grease and the wax melted to nothing. The gingery hairs shrivelled and the crescent of nail lay in a viscous pool of thick tallow.

Mother Heggy raised the crow gently from her lap, kissed its head and flung it into the air. With a frantic flapping it landed on the floor outside the cast circle.

'Fly, my lovely one! Fly to him now!' she croaked.

The crow hopped out, launching itself into the glimmering sky.

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Magus sprawled across his vast four-poster bed gazing at the bright diamond-paned windows. His sheets lay in a tangled heap, kicked off in the heat of the night as he'd slept fitfully. The sun was well up but he lay spread-eagled, magnificent body dark against the pure white sheets, his eyes glittering with fury. That damned boy!

His thoughts spun around like a vulture circling a carcass. Yesterday, the Summer Solstice, should have been a day of glory. Instead – ruined. For the first time in years the green magic had eluded him. Normally he'd have been teeming with power and energy after receiving the Goddess' gift, but today he felt only a flicker of his accustomed vitality. And it was all Yul's fault for fumbling with the torch and allowing the sacred flame to extinguish. The arteries in his temple pounded as he remembered the look of triumph in the dark-haired brat's eyes.

He recalled how all day yesterday, after that disastrous sunrise ceremony, Yul had excelled at the games held on the Village Green. Despite those two gruelling weeks at the quarry, which should have broken both his body and spirit, the boy had outstripped others in countless competitions. Magus had been furious to see Sylvie watching with shining eyes, cheering the boy on – not that he'd needed it. Magus had a horrible suspicion that not only had the Earth Magic failed to empower him, the rightful guardian of Stonewylde, but it had somehow gone to

Yul instead. What else would explain the boy's brightness and energy?

Magus smiled grimly as he recalled how he'd put an end to his apparently unstoppable success. Yul had stood alone under the shade of a tree on the Village Green, still flushed from the exertion of winning yet another race. Magus recalled with pleasure how the boy's deep grey eyes had clouded with fear at his approach.

'Solstice Blessings, Yul!'

'Solstice Blessings, sir.'

'You're doing remarkably well for someone who's been through such an ordeal so recently.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And for someone who shouldn't even be here today! I don't recall giving you permission to leave the quarry.'

'No, sir.'

Magus noticed how he trembled.

'So why did you leave Quarrycleave and return to the heart of Stonewylde?'

'I . . . I was told you had given permission, sir.'

Yul fidgeted, sweat beading his upper lip and beginning to trickle down his flushed face from beneath the heavy mass of dark curls. Magus nodded slowly, looking beyond the boy to where a crowd gathered around the drinks set out on trestle tables. He noticed Sylvie standing slightly apart, covertly watching as he addressed the boy. Anger welled unexpectedly.

'You completely fouled up the Solstice sunrise ceremony this morning,' he spat. 'Never before have I witnessed such fumbling incompetence!'

'I'm sorry, sir,' mumbled Yul, his heart thudding. This was the moment of truth – would Magus send him back to the horror of that white, dusty quarry?

'How dare you not only ruin the whole ritual with your clumsiness, but to then have the effrontery to speak *my* words in the ceremony? Who the hell do you think you are?'

Yul shook his head helplessly. Who was he? Someone special

and magical, as Mother Heggy would have him believe, or just a worthless Villager at the mercy of his enraged master?

‘I’ll tell you then,’ hissed Magus, ‘as words seem beyond you. You are nothing . . . less than nothing. You should never have left the quarry without my express permission and I’m very tempted to send you straight back there, especially in view of your appalling behaviour this morning.’

He enjoyed Yul’s start of horror, the way the boy tensed and shuddered.

‘However, I think you’ll be of more immediate use up at the Hall, where we’re so short-staffed. You’ll report to Martin in the morning, at first light, and do so for the duration of the Midsummer holidays. I’m sure there are plenty of dirty pots and pans to keep you busy. That will be all, boy.’

Magus watched as Yul loped off back towards his cottage, his earlier vitality and spark now doused. Magus sighed; he wasn’t finished with Yul yet, not by a long way, but he must be careful. Justice must always be seen to be done, and he’d sensed the boy’s popularity amongst the Villagers today during the races. Whatever happened, his own hands couldn’t be dirtied. But there was another option. Magus’ dark eyes scanned the hordes of people on the Green, drinking cider and elderflower champagne, laughing and chattering on this, the most special day of the year.

The vertical lines that grooved the skin on either side of his mouth creased further into a grim smile as he spotted the man he sought. Alwyn was quaffing cider outside the Jack in the Green, his bloated face tipped back as he poured the liquid down his throat. Magus noted the tanner’s heightened colour and increased girth, his great belly ballooning above his trousers. Alwyn hated the boy with a vengeance and just a few words of encouragement would add fuel to his raging desire to punish. Magus resolved to speak to him later. Alwyn was his instrument and only needed a little fine-tuning.

Magus had then turned his attention to locating Sylvie again. It was her birthday too and he thought of the large white box with its silver ribbon waiting up at the Hall. She was fifteen today

and although birthday gifts weren't usually given at Stonewylde, Magus had decided to make an exception. Sylvie was special and needed delicate grooming. She'd never had much, if Miranda's pathetic life story were to be believed. The exquisite dress, nestling in layers of white tissue paper, would be well worth its cost.

He saw Sylvie talking to Dawn and decided against speaking to her yet – the dress could wait till later. He recalled her promise to him the previous night on Solstice Eve to stay away from Yul. He'd be keeping a very close watch over her in future. It seemed that the Village brat had stolen his Earth Magic this Solstice; Magus didn't intend to let him steal Sylvie as well.

As he lay on his vast bed, with the morning sunlight streaming in on him and dancing on the deep crimson walls of his bedroom, Magus' thoughts jumped again, this time to an event a little later in the day. People were wandering off the Green in the warm afternoon, some going home for a nap before the evening's fun began. The Midsummer Dance would start later, with a feast laid out on the Green and music and merry-making in the Great Barn. Magus had noticed Alwyn about to head up the lane to his cottage, and had called him over. The tanner's porcine face had lit up with pleasure at being singled out by the master.

'Midsummer Blessings, sir!'

Magus had looked away from the man's features in distaste. Close up, his ruddiness was a myriad of engorged veins just under the surface of his fleshy skin. Even his piggy eyes were bloodshot. He wheezed from the tiny exertion of walking a few steps along the lane and his massive bulk gave out a hot, sour odour.

'A word with you, Alwyn. I'm sure you can guess the subject.'

The tanner nodded grimly, sweat running down into the folds of his neck.

'Aye, sir, I can that. The brat – he's back now.'

'He is, Alwyn, and already making mischief. Did you see the mess he made of the ceremony this morning?'

Alwyn's face flushed a deeper shade.

'Little bastard!' he spluttered, spittle flying and almost landing on Magus, who took a quick step back.

‘I want him held in check this time, Alwyn. You understand me? You’ve been too lenient with him over the years, which is why he’s so out of hand now.’

‘But sir, I—’

Magus held up a hand, his face stony.

‘No excuses. The boy is out of control and I’m sorry to say the blame must lie at your door. Why else would he be the only one at Stonewylde to constantly defy me and cause such trouble? I’m afraid, Alwyn, that I can only assume you’ve allowed him too much leeway. But no more! I’m holding you personally responsible for the boy’s behaviour. I expect you to be as harsh as is necessary. Is that perfectly clear? As harsh as you think fit.’

‘Aye, sir.’

Alwyn’s breathing was now so streperous that Magus wondered whether the man was capable of administering any form of beating at all.

‘Have you seen Yul yet since his return?’

‘No, sir. He’s not been home at all. ‘Twas a shock to see him at the Solstice sunrise this morning. I didn’t know you’d brung him back.’

‘Yes . . . the less said about that the better. But he is back. He’ll be working up at the Hall for the holiday and I’ll make sure Martin works him hard. But when he comes home at night time – then it’s up to you. I want that boy crushed and, as his father, it’s your duty to do it. I hope you won’t disappoint me this time, Alwyn.’

The tanner’s eyes, so buried in puffy fat as to be almost hidden, filled with tears and, forgetting protocol, he grasped Magus’ hand in a flurry of distress.

‘No sir, never. I’m so sorry, sir. I won’t let you down again. He’ll wish he’d never been born!’

Magus had nodded and disengaged himself from the man’s sweaty grip, turning away in disgust.

‘Him and me both,’ he’d muttered, heading back towards the Green.

But now, as Magus kicked away the twisted sheets and rose

from his bed, white hot fury flooded him yet again. It seemed that Yul had foiled him once more, though he was at a loss to see how. Was the boy responsible? How had it happened? Somehow Yul had evaded the intended punishment, and Alwyn lay now in a wing of this very building looking as if he'd never raise a whip again in this life.

Angrily, Magus padded through into his black marble bathroom and wrenched on the shower. He groaned as the cool water blasted his body, drenching his blond hair and running down his face. He stood for several minutes under the great showerhead until the heat inside him had subsided. He had six months. Six months until the Winter Solstice when Yul would reach adulthood.

Turning off the water, Magus smiled grimly to himself. As he dried his body briskly and reached for his exotic cologne, he met the reflection of his own velvety-black eyes.

'Mirror, mirror on the wall . . .' he muttered and then chuckled to himself. He needed no reassurance, for he knew the answer; he was the strongest of them all. Even without the Earth Magic.

Even earlier that morning, as Magus lay supine in his bed, Yul had arrived at the back of the Hall. Dressed in rough work clothes rather than smart festival ones, Yul had stood in the enormous cobbled yard outside the kitchens waiting for Martin to appear. In the pearly-grey half-light, the sun not yet risen, Yul had shivered and yawned in the slightly chill air whilst all around him the birds sang their divine dawn chorus. Eventually Martin had opened the wide oak door and scowled out, looking quite surprised to find Yul ready and waiting.

Yul had never liked Martin. He was about forty or so, clearly a Hallchild with his thin blond hair, but had never made it to the Hall School and thereby a life of privilege. He was dogged rather than quick-witted, relentless rather than resourceful, and had served at the Hall since he was a lad. He had no humour or warmth and was intensely loyal to Magus.

'Ah, there you are,' he grunted sullenly, as if Yul were late. He

came outside into the yard and looked Yul up and down. He knew the boy of course, for everyone at Stonewylde knew everyone else, but he acted as if Yul were a stranger.

‘The master has warned me about you, boy,’ he muttered. ‘Don’t mess me about or try to skive off or Magus will hear about it. He specially wants to know if you haven’t pulled your weight. Understood?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Yul wearily.

‘Right then, I’ve got you for the next five days, which is just as well seeing as we’re so short staffed. There’s extra Hallfolk here all needing to be served, and served well, mind you. Get in the kitchens and see what Marigold wants doing. And when you’ve done everything she needs, go down to the stables and report to Tom. Remember boy – no slacking or you’ll be very sorry.’

At the old butler’s sink in the scullery, Yul scrubbed hard at the baked-on grime in a huge pan. His thoughts turned to the events of yesterday, the Summer Solstice. It had been the most amazing day of his life, starting with Solstice Eve the previous night. He recalled the magical kiss he and Sylvie had shared under the yew tree on the Village Green. Standing with his sleeves rolled up and a scouring pad in his hand, Yul relived that moment of joy and certainty, when he knew without any doubt that they belonged together, the darkness and the brightness, just as Mother Heggy had predicted.

Then there was the incredible experience as the sun rose over the Stone Circle at Solstice sunrise, and the Green Magic pierced his soul. He’d never, as long as he lived, forget the bliss of receiving the Goddess’ bounty, nor the look of utter bewilderment on Magus’ face. He’d felt the effects of that magic all day as he won race after race. He sparkled with it, and every time he looked up there stood Sylvie, her silvery-grey eyes dancing with joy. The sight of her smiling at him as he competed in the races filled him with happiness, and then she’d beckoned to him. They’d managed to find a quiet corner round the back of the Great Barn, and she’d grasped his hand desperately.

‘I’ve brought the cake for you, Yul!’ she’d said hurriedly, gazing

up into his eyes. 'The cake Mother Heggy made. I've hidden it just outside your gate in the undergrowth. It's all wrapped up in rhubarb leaves so it's quite camouflaged. She said only Alwyn must eat it and nobody else. That's absolutely vital.'

He nodded slowly, doubt clouding his intent now that the moment had come. Sylvie had seemed to sense this.

'He'll kill you, Yul,' she said quickly. 'Remember the last time? Remember what Mother Heggy warned? Please, don't back down now. You *have* to go through with this.'

Yul nodded again. He kissed her slim hand and then joined the other lads for the next race. Not long afterwards, Magus had taken him to one side and informed him that he was to work every day throughout the holidays. Yul had made his way home, his heart seething with bitterness and the celebrations ruined. As he walked up the lane, a path he'd trodden every day of his life, his resolve stiffened. He deserved better than this. He wouldn't spend the rest of his life at the mercy of two men who for no apparent reason hated him to the point of destruction. He recalled Mother Heggy's words all those months ago and felt a surge of power. Now was the time.

'But Yul, my love, where's it from?'

His mother's deep grey eyes were puzzled as she took the package from him. Yul shrugged, not wanting to lie to her.

'Someone from the Hall just gave it to me,' he said. 'She said it was a special gift for Alwyn and him alone.'

'How strange! Maybe 'tis from Marigold up in the kitchens? I know he's been going up there for meals, though Goddess knows why seeing as I feed him well enough. The man has the appetite of a bull at the moment. Oh well, if 'tis come from the Hall it must be special.'

'And only for Alwyn, Mother. Nobody else must eat it, she said.'

'Aye, I understand. Well, he'll be home soon enough for a nap no doubt, after all that cider he's been putting back. Maybe he'll have a slice of the cake then. And you make yourself scarce, my boy. 'Twill be the first time you've been under the same roof for

a while and I don't want trouble today of all days. You go back to the Green, my love, and enjoy yourself. And Yul . . . I thought my heart would burst this morning at the ceremony, I was that proud of you.'

Maizie took her eldest son in her arms and hugged him fiercely, the fears and unhappiness of the past months forgotten for a moment. Yul felt her shudder with suppressed emotion and squeezed her tightly. During his exile first in the woods and then up at the quarry he'd missed his family a great deal, especially his mother.

They heard laughter and chatter outside and then the front door was flung open. His six siblings piled into the small sitting room: Rosie, with little Leveret in her arms, Geoffrey and Gregory almost as tall as their older sister now, and Gefrin and Sweyn fighting as usual. The children swarmed around Yul, delighted to see their oldest brother home again. Yul took Leveret from Rosie and laughed into her mop of black curls as he hugged her. There was a special place in his heart for this tiny little girl who adored him so much.

'Rosie, where's your father now?' asked Maizie quickly. 'Is he on his way back, or . . .?'

Too late they heard the tuneless whistling and everyone froze, all eyes turning in horror towards Yul. Alwyn stumbled into a still life; his wife and all seven children transfixed where they stood. In the total silence he stomped across the room and allowed his bulk to fall heavily into his armchair. Nobody moved. Alwyn's heavy breathing filled the room and he peered around at the group of statues until his gaze fell on the one he sought.

Maizie jerked into action.

'A bite to eat, Alwyn my dear?' she gabbled. 'There's a fine cake here, sent up from the Hall special, just for you. I'll cut you a nice big slice, shall I?'

She scurried into the kitchen and Alwyn grunted, his beligerent stare unbroken. Carefully Yul handed Leveret to Rosie and straightened his spine. Very slowly, footstep by footstep,

each child shrank backwards away from the armchair and the huge ginger-haired mound of flesh that was their father.

Now Yul stood alone, facing the man who'd almost beaten him to death not so long ago. His heart thudded but he found himself lifted with a strange courage. It thrilled through his veins and he felt strong. He looked Alwyn square in the eye, his cool grey gaze unwavering, his chin raised in defiance. He'd never looked into Alwyn's eyes before. They were buried almost completely in his bloated face, but Yul stared hard into the tiny pools of blue rage and felt a thrill of power. At this unheard of insolence, Alwyn's face suffused with blood. A great vein throbbed at his temple.

'Here you are then, my dear!' Maizie's voice was shrill. 'A lovely bit of cake from the Hall! And a nice bite of cheese. You enjoy that, and ...'

Alwyn glanced at the plate she'd laid on his lap and picked up the slab of moist dark cake. He growled and aimed a kick at his wife, who scuttled out of reach, trying to block Yul from his sight. Everyone remained rooted as Alwyn contemplated the cake in his hand. Gently Yul moved his mother to one side and stood again directly in the tanner's line of vision and almost within his grasp.

'You can fetch the strap off the hook,' grunted Alwyn. 'I'll warm your hide first afore we move on to the snake.' He shifted himself uncomfortably in the chair, a frown on his ruddy face. 'No getting away with it this time round, you little bastard. Upsetting the master like that – 'tis up to me to put a stop to it once and for all.'

He raised the thick slice of cake towards his mouth, but then paused.

'You hear me, boy?' he bellowed. 'I said fetch the strap!'

He bit hugely into the dark cake, his jowls swinging as he masticated and swallowed. He took another bite, and Yul folded his arms and remained where he was.

'You'll never lay a hand on me again,' he said quietly, his voice as shattering as a pebble thrown into a lake. Next to him

Maizie jerked with terror. But then her eyes widened as she watched. Alwyn's skin had turned deep crimson, the veins now bulging in both temples and his neck. His eyes were bloodshot and his mouth was working, trying to speak through the mass of half-chewed cake. He began to splutter and cough.

There was a tapping at the window and Yul flicked a glance towards it. The crow sat on the sill surveying the scene with a round eye. Alwyn's coughing turned into a fit of choking. He struggled to suck in breath, the violent rasp and wheeze in his constricted throat sickening to the ear. His eyes rolled up in his head and he pitched forward, crushing his plate and thrashing his arms. A strange noise came from his mouth, along with the dark mangled-up cake and a great foam of saliva. His body heaved and jerked in violent spasms. Then he threw himself back in the armchair and was still, soft wheezing the only sound in the crowded sitting room.

Everyone looked on in total, appalled silence, hands over mouths and eyes enormous. Nobody breathed, nobody moved. It was unthinkable; too shocking to comprehend. Then, unbelievably, Leveret broke the horrified hush. Her gurgle of laughter split the stillness as she pointed a tiny finger at the mess in her father's lap.

'Quiet, child!' moaned Maizie, shaking her head in bewilderment. She sent all the children back to the Village Green to find the young doctor. Only Yul remained with her and they stood together contemplating the tyrant slumped in the armchair, his eyes lifeless and breathing slow and loud.

'Goddess, I don't believe this,' she sobbed. 'What's happened to the man?'

Yul put a strong arm around his mother and kissed the top of her head.

'Don't you worry, Mother,' he said softly. 'I'll take care of the family.'

But as he stared at the bulky mass sprawled helplessly before him, his eyes hardened and he whispered into his mother's curls.

'Those who stand against me shall fall, one by one.'

The crow launched itself from the window sill and up into the sky, heading back to the tumbledown cottage.

As Yul now scoured the pan in the scullery of the Hall kitchens, he smiled at the tiled wall with pure pleasure. He felt as if a set of heavy shackles had been removed after a lifetime of chafing his skin. He felt as free as a swift on the summer thermals. Alwyn lay somewhere in the Hall right now, tucked away in the hospital wing and unable to move. It appeared he'd had some sort of seizure, possibly a stroke. The new doctor, who'd arrived just before the Solstice, said Alwyn might never recover.

Yul recalled the stab of joy he'd felt on hearing this, and the difference to the whole family's enjoyment of the Midsummer dance that evening. Maizie had hesitated at joining in the celebrations at such a time, with her husband lying up at the Hall and maybe at the gateway to the Otherworld. But Yul and Rosie had persuaded her it would be wrong not to honour the festival in the proper way. Reluctantly, Maizie had agreed to attend, and joined her family in bathing and dressing in their finest festival clothes for the feasting and dancing that night.

As Yul wiped the pan dry with a coarse linen cloth he smiled again. What a good thing they had attended the dance, for otherwise he'd have missed the heart-stopping sight of his beautiful moongazy girl sparkling like the brightest star in the heavens.