

## Echoes

### Echoes 1 – Orchard House

**“The first short story in the ongoing tales of Emma Hooper and her life after the destruction of Glade Hall. Word count 13,020 and as always, there’s a PDF version in the download area.”**

Σ

~ Then ~

~ Three Years Previously ~

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

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

“Scared Emma.”

“Only brave boys get chocolate.”

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

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

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

“This is not as agreed !”

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

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

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

“Yes, we will protect him.”

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

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~ Now ~

Emma Hooper, daughter of Jerome and Alice Hooper was now twenty two. She was now running her own business and fully independent, though that wasn’t completely to her liking. Unsurprisingly her parents were still angry about her stealing from them, lying to them and then there was the really big sin of burning down the family home. It was probably a good thing they weren’t aware of her being quite close to offering Jerome Jnr, her baby brother, as an offering to the old Gods. That would have definitely made them even more antagonistic.

“Branca..... Where are you ?” She called.

Emma was currently standing in amongst the ruins of Glade Hall, where the old Maynard Family Chapel had once stood, to be exact. Neat, tidy and relatively safe ruins, English Heritage had seen to that. Glade Hall had been a listed building and as far as they were concerned, the few remaining

walls, window surrounds and fireplaces, needed to be preserved for future generations. Thanks to their intervention the ruins of Glade Hall would never be cleared, no modern building would ever replace it. That suited Emma Hooper.

“Branca !..... Oh, where is that girl ?”

Originally it looked as though events at Glade Hall that fateful night had sent all the wraith, spirits and ghosts to wherever such phantoms eventually went to. It was a few months after that dreadful night of flames, inferno and ruin, when Emma first saw a glow moving through the bricks and rubble. Few could have seen the glow and even fewer would have recognised the ghostly form creating the glow. Branca still haunted the ruins and she’d been useful to Emma on many occasions.

“I’m here my dear.”

Branca was still dressed in the tight revealing dress she’d worn for him that night, the dress she’d been killed while wearing. Nothing to do with symbolism or the rules of purgatory, Emma knew that now. Any clothing ghosts wore, was merely a projection, created by them. Branca had liked the dress while alive, she thought it made her look pretty, nothing more.

“They’re getting restless about Jerry again.” Said Emma. “His innocence upsets them. I need the perfect offering to avoid conflict with them, something very special.”

It never felt strange talking to the ghost, thinking of her as a friend. Hermione was just as ghostly, just as nebulous. Yet Emma thought of them both as good friends, true friends who never judged. She’d had enough judgement from her parents to last a lifetime.

“I mentioned Orchard House before.” Said Branca. “There’s still real power there, enough damaged souls to keep the old ones happy for a long time. There is still the problem of Asher Benedict.”

A living human occultist of immense power. Emma was confident she could win against him; she had beaten the three witches who’d claimed Glade Hall as their own. They’d been dead for centuries though, but Benedict was very much alive.

“I’d prefer not to treat the living as prey, but better him than my brother.” Said Emma.

“Don’t underestimate Asher Benedict; he was head of his own occult order for decades. There are those who say he’s old, a spent force. Some say he now has all the occult ability of a pet rabbit. I doubt if that is the case. The spirits I talk to still fear him.”

“Does he still live alone ?” Asked Emma.

“He was the last time we discussed Orchard House. I will seek out those who know if that’s still the case.”

“Tell me again about the house ? I remember it was in South Wales.”

Branca had a sense of humour, it was just hard to see. People tend to smile or grin if they’re about to be sarcastic, or try to be amusing. Branca’s expression was like the party frock she was wearing, it never changed.

“It’s still in South Wales, a few miles south of Llanddeusant. There is still an orchard of course, though the fruit on the trees is inedible.”

“I’m sorry Branca, I know we went right through the details, but so much has happened. May I share your thoughts, please ?”

“Of course.”

No one was there to watch, few now braved the bad reputation of the ruins. If anyone had been there, they’d have seen the two creatures merge. The young human female merge with the glowing phantom. Emma pulled in everything, far more than just bare facts about Orchard House and its sole occupant. She picked up Branca’s own fears, assumptions and feelings on what she had heard from others of her kind. Quite quickly the merged beings became separate entities once again.

“Thank you Branca and you’re right, I was underestimating Benedict.”

“That could prove fatal, even for you.” Said Branca. “You have more power than any mortal should possess Emma Hooper. Few could harm you, though I suspect Asher Benedict is one of those few.” Emma didn’t travel alone in her constant search for offerings to appease the old Gods. Hermione could follow her anywhere, the ghost of a seventeen year old girl who had died tragically in the Glade Hall grotto. Poor Hermione had only wanted a kiss from William James Maynard, perhaps a brief intimate touch. He’d betrayed her, leaving her as an offering for whatever wanted to claim her mortal life.

“I’ll summon Hermione once I’m there.” Said Emma. “Tommy can come with me, the oldest of the Turner’s boys is quite capable of running the farm now. At least for a few days.”

Tommy Milner was human, sometimes far too human. Basically a good man who’d been charged with a murder he didn’t commit. The favours Emma had needed to save Tommy from a life behind bars, were a large part of her debt to the old Gods. Tommy was loyal to her and brave these days, far braver than the man she’d met when she was nineteen. As long as there was someone to look after his beloved sheep, Tommy would go with her.

“Talk to Adam before you go.” Said Branca.

“I was already going to. Can you think of anything else that might help ?”

“You shared all my thoughts about Orchard House. What I knew, you now know. Talk to Adam though; ask him about the artefacts they found in the old foundations when they built Glade Hall.”

“I will.”

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Tommy Milner thought he owed Emma, but not for getting him out of jail. It was her fault he’s been there in the first place. To him his guilt, his crime, was being a worshipper at the glade for most of his life and not telling her. Worse, he’d betrayed a nineteen year old Emma. He owed her, though sitting at his kitchen table while trying to summon a long dead architect, had to pay off a large chunk of his guilt. Last time there had been consequences, their activities had been noticed.

“I’m not saying this is a bad idea, you know better than me.” He said. “It’s just that the last time you summoned Adam Glanville, there was a fire in my barn.”

“Coincidence Tommy.” Said Emma.

“Bullshit, someone noticed what we were doing. It was a warning.”

“Hermione is here and she’ll watch for any unwanted spirits. They will find I’m a far worse enemy than they probably imagine.”

Tommy could rarely see Hermione, though he knew she was there. The occasional feeling of a breeze on his cheek where there was no breeze, sometimes the distinct scent of Jasmine. The only time he’d seen Hermione as a young Victorian girl had been one year on the 30<sup>th</sup> April. Walpurgis Night at a little before midnight, when the world’s mystical forces are at their strongest.

“Where is Hermione ?” He asked.

“The chair to your right, put your hand on the table.” Said Emma.

It mattered to him knowing where she was, the slight cool breeze over the back of his hand was strangely comforting. Emma sat opposite him, her hand on a book she never opened.

“Adam Glanville, please answer my call. Come to me.” Said Emma.

Tommy had heard a lot about Glanville, the expert architect who’d designed Glade Hall. Not only designer he’d overseen the construction and the welfare of hundreds of workers. The eighteenth century architect had written prayers and rituals in Latin on the back of some wooden panelling, as a

warning to future generations. It seemed that Glanville had a fairly dim view of the Maynard family and their devotion to practising the dark arts.

“Why do you call me again child ?”

Emma was looking past him, towards the kitchen door. She could see just about every phantom, spirit and ghost they’d summoned into his kitchen. Tommy had to make do with hearing their voices, which always sounded faint and distant.

“I am in need of your help to defeat a powerful wielder of occult power.”

Tommy heard a sigh, a definite sigh.

“Emma Hooper, you are no better than the Maynards. To my shame I have aided you in obtaining offerings for the evil you serve, but no more. I will no longer answer your summons.”

“My six year old brother is under their gaze again.” Said Emma. “It’s his innocence that they find so provoking. Help me or they will take him. Not just his life, they’ll burn away his soul.”

The sigh came again, longer and louder than before.

“Oh, you’ve used that excuse so often Emma.”

“I’ve used it before and I’m likely to use it again. That doesn’t make it any the less true.”

“And you’re still refusing to make him one of their acolytes ?”

“Yes, that must be his decision when he’s a grown man. I won’t encourage or discourage him to take either path.”

“Oh Emma, Emma, Emma.”

Silence for quite a while, with Emma sat patiently, still looking towards the kitchen door.

“I will not guarantee to help you in future. Why do you need me to aid you now ?” Asked Glanville.

“I’m sure you must have heard of Orchard House and Asher Benedict ? The house was probably there in your day, but Benedict must be a man of my century.”

Laughter now, the sound of laughter which seemed to be coming from the kitchen ceiling.

“Oh Emma Hooper, you’ve picked a worthy adversary, though you’re wrong about Benedict and his lifespan. He knew the Maynards and was infamous in my day. A powerful and wicked user of black magic. A most foul practitioner of the occult. I have no idea how old he really is. There are rumours of him learning at the knee of John Dee in the fifteen eighties.”

“I had no idea, though Branca didn’t think he was harmless.” Said Emma.

“Harmless indeed ! No one survives that number of years if they’re harmless. I can tell you quite a lot about Asher Benedict. There are some who believe he was teaching John Dee, rather than the other way round.”

“Branca also mentioned some artefacts you found in the foundations of the old Glade House, the one Hugh Curwen burned down.”

“I suspect he was just there when it happened.” Said Glanville. “The artefacts would definitely help you fight Benedict, but you will need to dig for them.”

“Where are they ?”

“Below the ruins of the Maynard Private Chapel, deep beneath them.”

“But the old cellars collapsed.”

“Then you will have to do a lot of digging. Now let me tell you all about Asher Benedict.....”

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Hermione Wood had been the daughter of an up and coming MP, someone rumoured to be destined for great things. If his daughter hadn’t gone missing in eighteen twenty he might well have reached the top. They never did find Hermione’s body and that seemed to drive him towards drink and the end of his political career.

As Emma was saying goodnight to Tommy after talking to the long dead spirit of Adam Glanville; Hermione felt a presence, a watching spirit that had no right to be there. It hadn't been summoned, it hadn't been there before the séance and worst of all, it was trying to hide. Hermione could see it though; few could escape her gaze if she was being especially alert. Her glow increased with her agitation, even Tommy was looking right at her.

"Something unclean is watching Emma." She said.

"Go inside Tommy, don't leave home again tonight." Said Emma.

After they'd heard Tommy lock and bolt his front door, Emma began to glow too. Her glow was the power freely given by the old Gods. A glowing grey mist covered Emma from head to foot, when she asked the obvious question.

"Where is it hiding?" She asked.

"A filthy disgusting thing, it hides by the barn door, watching which spirits answer your call."

"We can't have that."

Hermione had seen Emma use a lot of spells and she rarely intoned any rituals. Emma's use of magic seemed to be innate, a power inside her granted by the dark ones of the glade. A little Latin occasionally, sometimes the odd piece of Tudor English. Hermione felt the words of the language of the old ones as Emma whispered them, almost to herself. The ground beneath them vibrated with the raw energy Emma was unleashing.

"A witch, the corrupt and damned soul of a bad witch." Hissed Emma. "I see you foul creature, you can't hide from me now."

At first it looked as though all that power had achieved nothing. Hermione saw it first as a clear ball of energy, full of writhing arms and legs. As the ball came closer what it held became clearer. Just one twisted soul was writhing about; a female corrupt soul with just the usual two arms and two legs.

"Oh, kill it Emma." Said Hermione. "Give it a true and final death.....I can almost smell its corruption."

"Not yet, let's see who I caught in my net."

Emma leant forward, her right hand piercing the ball of energy.

"Be still, or I'll use a little hellfire on you."

Her index finger touched the forehead of the dead witch and it stopped twisting and turning.

"He'll kill you..... You'll be the one to burn." It hissed.

"So, someone has been whispering my secrets." Said Emma. "Tell me who sent you to spy on me?"

"You'll be the one to burn pretty one."

"Tell me?"

Emma moved her index finger down, letting it rest on the spirit's cheek for a second. Oh, how it tried to wriggle and escape as the red hot spot of flame burned. Another touch from Emma and the burning stopped.

"Can who sent you do that unclean one?" Asked Emma. "Whoever you're scared off, I can hurt you far more than them."

"Asher.....See I'm not scared of him..... Anyway.....Asher will kill you. Eat your pretty eyes he will."

"So Asher Benedict sent you." Said Emma. "That was sooner than I expected. Someone really has been whispering my secrets."

"I had to ask a lot of questions to find out about Orchard House." Said Hermione. "Benedict was almost certain to hear about it."

"Orchard House, yes you go there pretty one." Said the captured spirit. "Asher is waiting for you, with his pain and suffering."

“Oh, kill it Emma.” Said Hermione. “Burn the foul thing with hellfire and be rid of it.”

“No, it might be useful.... What is your name dead witch ?”

Just a hiss, it appeared that their captive had run out of threats about what Asher would do. Emma touched the foul thing, running her hand over its right leg. Oh, Hermione almost felt sorry for it, as its spectral limb withered and twisted. Now it found its voice. It screamed, the dead witch screamed loud enough for any within miles to hear. Only those with the power to hear the voices of the dead of course. Emma touched the spirit again and the twisted limb returned to normal, or as normal as it had ever been.

“Can you Asher do that ?” Asked Emma

No answer.

“Perhaps the other leg ?”

“No, he can’t.”

“Now, tell me the name you used while you were alive ?”

“Eliza.”

“Eliza what ?”

“Eliza Jenks.”

“Please kill it.” Said Hermione.

“Not yet, she might be useful.”

Emma muttered and the energy sphere was gone. The spirit calling itself the soul of Eliza Jenks tried to move, only to find Emma had tethered it to the spot in some way.

“I will give you a choice Eliza.” Said Emma. “You can be bound to me and the old ones, as our servant forever, or I can give you a true death. Be cautious though.....If you agree and betray me, the pain will be unimaginable and last for a very long time.”

“Are you going to kill Asher ?” Asked Eliza.

“Worse than kill, I’m going to capture him as an offering to the old ones.”

The thing that had once been a human female could actually smile.

“You don’t need to bind me..... I’ll help you.”

“I can only trust you if you’ve been bound to me. Is your name really Eliza Jenks ? Think about it, there will be a lot of pain and burning if you dare lie to the old ones.”

“It’s the name I was born with, I swear it.”

“Were you christened with it ?” Asked Emma.

“Not sure.”

“No matter, it was your given name, that’s all that counts. I’ll ask you again Eliza Jenks; do you agree to be bound to me and the old Gods I serve ?”

“You’re really going to give him to.....Them ?”

If a spirit could ever be said to show true emotions, the ghost of the witch Eliza looked too scared to even mention the old ones.

“I am.”

“Then yes, I will be bound to you.”

Emma sat on the ground near the huddled, spectral form of Eliza. Hermione sat too, out of politeness. She had no body to feel the stony, wet, cold ground, so she tried to imagine how uncomfortable it had to be for Emma.

“So, Eliza Jenks..... We shall begin the binding. This may take a while.....”

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Emma looked at the five men, all digging furiously, and decided none of them would be welcomed into the world of archaeology. They weren't interested in the shards of Roman pottery being destroyed, or the marble columns their spades were chipping. They were hired men, paid quite a lot for a single night of back breaking work, with a huge bonus if they reached the artefacts before dawn. Even Tommy was there, trying to earn enough cash to buy a few luxuries for his farmhouse. "We should stop and put in a few timbers." Said the oldest of Turner's boys. "No good digging like crazy if it all collapses on us."

"I told you when we started." Said Emma. "I won't let the sides of the diggings collapse, you have my word."

They knew of course, all of them really did know, even if they would never admit to knowing. Much in the same way that everyone who lived locally had a relative who'd once visited the glade, or knew someone who'd made an offering there. As with all local folklore and rumours, they were probably far more lurid than the truth. Emma was respected and feared in about equal measure.

"Fair enough, good enough for me." Said Barry.

"No offence.....Just with my brother being here." Said the oldest of the Turner's boys.

"I understand, just dig if you want that bonus." Said Emma. "Dig like fury and let me worry about keeping you safe."

"Fine." Said Bob.

Emma was now the proud owner of the The Copper Kettle public house. The existing owners had wanted to leave the area after the numerous deaths and incidents connected with Glade Hall. Emma had needed somewhere to live in the local area. There had been a settlement of a sorts with her parents, a large coming of age payment on her twenty first birthday. A very generous payment from a trust fund set up when she'd been born. Her parents could have tried to stop it, but they hadn't. There was an informal agreement that Emma wasn't to have any further financial connections or support from her parents. Emma had bought several local businesses, including Sheila's Flowers and The Copper Kettle. She now lived in the accommodation above the pub.

As for Barry and Bob ? They were regulars in the pub with a need for cash. Both were discreet and had flexible ideas about the law and morality. Emma hadn't asked them to, though she suspected they'd happily move a body for her, if the price was right.

"Do you feel it yet ?" Tommy asked her in a whisper.

"Yes, it's there... It almost calls out to me Tommy." She said. "Twenty feet..... Keep them digging."

"I will.... Don't take any offence at them being nervous."

"Of course not, I understand. Just crack the whip a little Tommy."

Emily Turner wasn't exactly a friend, though she'd lived in the area all her life. Her sons just about ran the farm for Tommy, the eldest had been officially given the title of Assistant Manager. The eldest understandably was a little protective of his seventeen year old brother.

"Dig, no more rest breaks." Said Tommy. "Twenty feet to go, all of it through soft soil and rubble."

"I expect a few free pints too." Said Bob.

"You'll get them, just dig like the devil himself is after you." Said Tommy.

Emma had never wanted to return to the cellars and catacombs below Glade House. Most of them had been engulfed by the inferno that had claimed the house, or collapsed by one of the explosions caused by Emma and her companions. Several bodies had never been recovered and there was the constant danger of finding human remains as they dug.

"This looks like part of a lighting system." Said Barry.

"Not interested, dump it on the spoil heap." Said Tommy.

She'd never intended for Tommy to pick up a shovel and dig, he was there to supervise. Not that she'd discouraged him from helping. Every extra shovel meant more soil and debris dug out per hour. Emma watched, understanding why areas of sandy soil were stained red, even if the men didn't. At an hour before dawn, someone's shovel skidded off the lid of a stone sarcophagus.

"We're there..... Clear the ground around it." Said Emma.

English Heritage had constantly given her father grief over the Roman structures beneath Glade Hall and the finds of Saxon gold jewellery. They'd have had wet dreams about the marble sarcophagus the men were clearing of sand and rubble. Not that the object had anything to do with lost civilisations in Southern England. Emma doubted if the large marble box had even originated in our world, or even our reality.

"You can all go now, everyone apart from Tommy." She said. "Come to the Kettle tonight and I'll have your cash, including the bonus. There'll also be quite a few free pints."

"I like the sound of that." Said Barry.

"You won't get the lid off this thing without a few of us pushing at it." Said the oldest Turner's boy.

"Don't worry, I'll get it off." She said.

Once it was just her and Tommy looking at the sarcophagus, she just walked around it for a while, as if feeling it out. It was weird and alien looking, like something from another world.

"I had no idea this was here, right under where I.....Where Dean died."

"Perhaps this place contains other wonders." Said Tommy.

"Perhaps, though I don't feel anything. Mind you, I didn't feel this until we'd dug down over thirty feet."

"Do you need a hand getting the lid off?" Asked Tommy.

As if it was a jar of pickle with a stiff lid. He was willing though and would have probably given himself a hernia trying to lift it.

"It must weigh several tons..... I'll bring a few shadows here, the guardians of the glade. Don't worry Tommy, they won't harm you."

"Then the old ones will know what's here."

"They know everything anyway. That's one of the problems with Gods, even old ones."

Emma's link with the glade worked both ways. She provided offerings of mystical energy and the glade allowed her to draw off power. It would be more power once the old yew trees had recovered from the fire, but they were still prodigiously powerful. Emma only had to picture a group of shadows, for them to appear at the bottom of the diggings.

"Carefully my creatures." She said. "Gently remove the lid from this marble box."

The shadows were nebulous creatures formed of grey mist, yet they were incredibly strong. They only had to nudge the lid for it to slide over and fall to the floor.

"You may go now." Said Emma.

They were on their own and once more Emma felt a strange reluctance to look, to see what secrets the ghost of Adam Glanville had been keeping for nearly three hundred years.

"I suppose we should look inside." She said.

There were bones, of course there were bones. Bones so old that most had turned to dust. Just enough was left of the skull to give the impression of something that had never been human.

"Someone else has been here, everything is disturbed." Said Tommy.

"Glanville had to have found it while they were excavating to build the chapel." She said. "Imagine suddenly coming across this sarcophagus in the mid seventeen hundreds."

"They must have thought they'd found an entrance to hell."

“Giants Tommy, every weird find was put down to giants in those days. Glanville obviously looked everything over before burying it again.”

“Maybe we should bury it again ?”

“Where’s your spirit of adventure Tommy Milner ?”

“It’s currently at home, hiding in the attic.”

Burying someone important on a world that wasn’t theirs and there had to be a reason, probably a dangerous reason. Emma shared a little of Tommy’s anxiety, as she picked up a golden death mask. “Heavy and has that look of soft high quality gold.” She said. “Plenty of expensive looking grave goods. Glanville must have been tempted, he wasn’t a wealthy man. We should have brought a table.”

She placed the death mask on the rubble behind them and reached for what looked like a plain rod, made of something resembling Ebony. Her fingers began to tingle as soon as she touched it.

“This is it Tommy, I can feel the power in it.”

“What does it do ?”

“I have no idea.”

There were several jars next to the dust that had once been bones. Two golden tablets with writing etched into them in a language she didn’t know. A few scrolls obviously looked at and retied with string by Glanville. Right at the foot end of the marble sarcophagus was a large jar, with a piece of parchment wrapped around it.

“A message from Adam Glanville I expect.” She said. “The writing is badly faded. Shine one of the lights on it for me Tommy.”

Parchment lasted for centuries, but the inks used in the middle of the eighteenth century tended to fade with time. Emma held the parchment up as Tommy moved one of the excavation lights a little closer.

“Latin, definitely Latin.” She said. “If only I was more used to his writing.”

As she made out each word, the result was rather disappointing.

“Oh, it says ‘Do not let it out, it killed Grundy.’ I was hoping for something more useful.”

“Knowing you, you’ll insist on opening it.”

“Of course I will. Don’t worry though, I’ll wait until I’m on my own to do it. We’ll take everything out and get the shadows to take it all to the catacombs beneath the glade, it’ll be safe there. Once we’re finished I’ll allow gravity to collapse the diggings and bury everything again.”

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They’d used the farm truck rather than Emma’s car to get to South Wales. The truck fitted right into the local farming community, no one was likely to give it a second glance. No booking into motels, they’d spent the night sleeping in the truck, pushing the seats back as far as they’d go.

“Don’t blush Tommy, we’ve done this before.” Said Emma.

True they had, he had to think for a few seconds to count the number of times. The only difference this time was hunting a living human. That was a first.

“I could stand outside while you change, if you like ?”

“Don’t be silly, it’s not as if I’m naked.”

Tommy Milner wasn’t quite sure how he now viewed Emma. His feelings had gone from paternal to big brother, right through to adoring sidekick. Whatever way he felt about her, watching her change her top after using a roll on deodorant, just didn’t feel right. He had to change too and although the change didn’t include underwear; he’d have preferred facing half a dozen evil spirits.

“Hurry up and change Tommy, there are only so many hours of darkness.” Said Emma.

Always at night, even though it usually strengthened those they hunted, it strengthened Emma more. Tommy put on a clean T shirt, even borrowing Emma's roll on deodorant when it was offered. "I'll be interested to see this Eliza creature." He said. "If I can see her?"

"As with Hermione, you'll probably just hear her."

His weapons and usual paraphernalia were in the back of the truck. Tommy liked to think of himself as a rogue demon hunter, a phrase he'd heard on TV once. He had a pump action shotgun loaded with cartridges full of silver shot. It helped that Emma wasn't short of money, but the cartridges were precious and he always treated them as a last resort. In films it was werewolves who feared silver. In the real world just about all creatures and spirits of the dark were injured by silver, sometimes even killed. Pockets full of ampules of holy water, totems and other devices to fight evil. His usual battle equipment topped off by a huge crucifix on a chain around his neck. The crucifix was the only item in his rogue demon fighting ensemble to be openly ridiculed by Emma.

"Well Tommy.....It might be useful if we're ever attacked by the ghost of Bela Lugosi."

He knew most of what he carried was fairly useless, but not the shotgun. The silver pellets had been blessed by a clergyman and really did some damage. He'd made an unclean spirit howl in pain with the shotgun. Aiming by the sounds it made of course, his eyes rarely saw anything of those they hunted.

"We've two miles of trudging through wet grass and bog to get there." Said Emma.

"How big is Orchard House?"

"Fairly large, about fifteen bedrooms, a conservatory and an indoor tennis court. That was when it was built of course. Built by a wealthy landowner who went bust, it's been left to fall apart from neglect."

"And Asher Benedict chooses to live in the ruins?"

"Not a total ruin, though it has a bit of a bad reputation in the area. One of my dad's friends in the police still just about talks to me. He said the house became a place for street people to live for a while. Every drop out and junkie in South Wales was the way he phrased it. Then all of a sudden they all vanished and it was assumed they'd simply moved on."

"Do you think Benedict dealt with them in some way?" Asked Tommy.

"Maybe, though I doubt it, he had coexisted with them for years. We might find out their fate tonight. I think Eliza knows more than she tells.....She's fairly confusing to talk to anyway. You'll see what I mean when I summon her. All I really want her to do is locate Benedict for us."

Farming for years had taught him how to keep warm and dry. His boots were still dry inside after walking for at least an hour through grass and bog, most of it bog. No trees, they could see the house clearly from a good quarter of a mile away.

"Time to stop and summon our ghostly helpers." Said Emma.

There was a single light in an upper window of Orchard House, lamplight judging by how it flickered. The whole scene reminded Tommy of far too many horror films.

"It looks like Asher Benedict is home." He said.

"And he'll know we're here, if he's half as good as people say he is."

"He'll be a good solid target for once Emma. If I get the chance, I'll put a few silver pellets into him."

"Target his legs only, we need him alive. Though not necessarily all in one piece....Right, Eliza first I think."

"Do you still intend to let Hermione have it..... What we found?"

"Yes, she's the only one of us who might get close enough to use it."

For a moment he expected Emma to sit on the wet ground, but she carried out the summoning while standing. The spirit arrived slowly and when Eliza Jenks looked as solid as she was going to look, he could see her.

"I can see her, clear as day." He said.

"Probably this place, I can feel all sorts of energies running wild." Said Emma.

He could see her and the dead witch could obviously see him.

"Is he a bit touched or something?" She asked.

"Tommy is a good friend, you will treat him with respect."

"If you say so."

"I do, now go and find Asher Benedict. Act as though you still serve him, tell him where we are. He'll know anyway."

He saw her go, a luminous trail hurtling towards Orchard House. Inviting her to betray them seemed strange to him, but Emma had discussed the plan with him over coffee at his kitchen table.

"Betray me and she burns, and she knows that. We'll see the hellfire and hear the screams from miles away."

Hermione next and again he could see her. A young Victorian girl in her best party dress. She looked so young, far younger than her words sounded.

"I can see you too Hermione. Now I can use the shotgun without worrying about hitting you."

"It's Orchard House, I can feel it..... Something powerful and dangerous calls it home. The power there.....It's moving towards us like ripples on a pond." Said Hermione.

It had to be habit by now, the brief touch of her fingers on his arm or cheek, to tell him she was there. Now he could feel her touch as though she was a living girl.

"We must talk." Said Emma.

"You still want to give me that.....Evil thing?"

"Yes, and you must use it if you get the chance."

They moved away to talk, quite an animated discussion. Hermione even appeared to cry at one point, if a ghost could cry? Eventually she accepted the jar from Emma, the one that was supposed to have killed someone called Grundy in some way. He'd seen the girl slam doors and throw things across the room. Carrying something as large and heavy as the jar though, that was strange. He was tempted to ask Emma about it. She had to have a million and one things on her mind though.

"Come on Tommy, it's high time we introduced ourselves to Mr Benedict." She said.

The light in the upstairs window went out when they were about twenty feet from the large entry doors. Palladian was the style, he'd heard the various owners of Glade Hall use the term. Orchard House had been beautiful once, the stonework still had a certain beauty. Through a portico with its columns of grubby white stone and then through the doors, which looked to have been left ajar for a very long time. There was a scream as they entered Orchard House, the shrill scream of someone terrified or in excruciating pain.

"Welcome to Orchard House." Muttered Emma.

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Eliza Jenks hadn't chosen life as a witch; the skills had been with her at birth. One of her aunts had been skilled in preparing potions guaranteed to cure a variety of minor ailments. Two women on her father's side of the family had been accused of selling curses. Add on a few other rumours and Eliza hadn't been surprised that sometimes, if she hated someone enough and used the right spells.....That person died. Alright sometimes they'd just been inflicted with boils or lost the use of a leg, but it happened, her spells worked. Her parents had died in one of the bad winters during the

reign of Queen Elizabeth and Eliza had turned to various ways of earning a living, none of them honest. She'd even tried whoring for a while. One night she woke to find ashes where there'd been a paying customer in her bed only an hour or so before.

"On your back for pleasure girl, never to make enough coins to eat."

Her mother's great grandmother was a long time dead. A famous witch, or infamous, depending on how you viewed the selling of curses and dark charms. A ghost now of course, but one who had retained many of the skills she'd had in life. Eliza's fate had been sealed, when she agreed to be taught by the ghost of the infamous witch.

Eliza Jenks learned all the ancient ghost would teach her and her fame began to grow. She might have become one of the legendary greats, her name mentioned in books written in Latin and kept hidden by the clergy. Quite suddenly she'd died just two days before her twenty seventh summer. A wasting disease of some kind claimed her, giving her a painful and lingering death. Her spells refused to even slow it down. Her growing success had probably attracted the envy of a far more powerful witch than herself. Eliza no longer resented being killed. Nor did she still cling to hopes of revenge against the spirit of whoever had killed her. The truth was that she'd been dead for so long, that being an earth bound spirit was normal to her, she actually enjoyed it. Eliza flew through the open doors of Orchard House, her ghostly form hovering a good two feet above the ground.

"A light in an upstairs window Asher." She muttered. "These ones are good; they'll never fall for that old trick."

She knew Asher well, he was a traditionalist. He'd have his living quarters deep down, probably still somewhere below the second basement. One owner of Orchard House had dug down into a cave system, giving them a back way out through a now disused mine. Eliza dropped down through the floor and then another, until she was in the second basement below the house.

"I'll give you this Asher; you always manage to surprise me." She mumbled.

She hadn't really expected to feel any living creatures in the depths of Orchard House. There was Asher Benedict of course, though he could hide any sign of his presence and he rarely had visitors. The occasional victim perhaps, but almost never a willing visitor. Who were the five living humans moving through the basement? That was the surprise, that was the cause of her curiosity. Not quite humans, which piqued her curiosity even more.

"Guards, must be guards."

Very strange guards, another two seemed to spring to life in an instant and then another two. Eliza had the curiosity of a dozen felines, she simply had to know who they were, the creatures who behaved so strangely. No simply dropping herself into the cave system, Asher might view that as a hostile act, even if she was supposed to be an ally. Eliza used the stairs, a long winding set of stone stairs. By the time she was in the dry section of the caves, there were a dozen living creatures quite near her. Then suddenly there were fourteen.

"Has Asher become a God, creating life as he pleases?"

The answer came quite quickly, something appearing to be born out of the cave floor quite near her. It moaned and writhed in what appeared to be pain, as the creature tore itself free of the pit it had been lying in. A male human in ragged clothing, though he didn't seem to be properly awake. He snarled at her, before grunting as he walked into the cave wall.

"Clever Asher....Using the street people as watchdogs. I doubt if they'll slow down Emma though."

The human looked more alert as he woke up. After raising a hand as if to strike, there was a look of recognition. All servants of the dark powers knew each other. There might not be much mutual respect, but Asher's guard creature was now ignoring her.

Asher's domain was impossible to accurately remember, she suspected some kind of confusion spell. Every visit meant wandering through the caves until she came to the door of fire. Presumably if she was no longer in favour she'd never find the door, perhaps she'd even find true death instead. Eliza turned left and then right so many times, constantly finding more and more street people being used as guards. They might not have any spells or serious weapons, but there were a lot of them. "Lagging behind the times Asher." She muttered. "You should have hired a few mercenaries with assault rifles and grenades."

A large female in a filthy dress screeched at her, but didn't attack. Eliza suspected the creatures were just there to make a noise and let Asher know how far Emma had progressed through the caves. The Romans had used geese, and it seemed Asher had decided to use street people and junkies. As always, she reached the door of fire just as she was beginning to think it was hidden from her. "Now I'll know if he no longer trusts me."

Fire, the purging flames. She'd never seen the door consume an enemy of Asher's, though she never questioned that it could. The door was its own certificate of authenticity. The feeling of heat that hit you ten feet away, the flecks of white heat in amongst the general red hot look. Everything screamed danger, everything backed up Asher's claim that anything living, dead or undead, could be totally consumed by his fire door. And the only way to see him, was to risk the door. "Fuck it."

She had to still be on Asher's guest list. The flames cooled as she entered the door and it didn't try to molest or burn. She was now inside his lair, right there in the hall where he sat on an ornate throne made out of dark red wood. Insane of course and unpredictable, but still one of the most powerful occultists who'd ever lived. Eliza moved slowly towards him, giving him plenty of time to get used to her presence in his domain.

"They're here Asher, Emma Hooper and those helping her."

She stopped close enough for him to hear her, yet still far enough away to stand a chance of dodging anything nasty aimed in her direction. Asher Benedict sat on his throne, dressed in a long robe that glowed with energy. So many protective spells were locked into that robe. Eliza was hoping to steal it in the confusion if Emma won the coming battle. Asher himself looked less impressive than his clothes. A small glamour spell could so easily have kept his appearance young and attractive. Yet there he was, face full of wrinkles beneath a shiny bald head.

"Ahhh, it's Eliza come to tell me what I already know." He said.

"She serves the old Gods."

"Something else I already know. She wishes to offer me to them, like a basket of fruit at harvest festival. The audacity and cheek of the girl."

"Are you going to stay here and wait for her to arrive?"

Wrong to ask a paranoid occultist such a direct question, his eyes began to look for deceit.

"What did she offer you street urchin, a home, a place among the dark ones in the glade?"

It was hard to tell with Asher. He might know something or it might be a strange test of loyalty. Or he might be accusing her because of his deep seated insanity. Paranoia can be dangerous for even the most loyal friends. Asher lived alone because he'd driven away or killed all those who'd once followed him. An admission of treachery was unthinkable, probably certain death.

"Nonsense, I'm loyal.....Didn't I find the Altmeyers for you?"

A little bit of self-interest really, the Altmeyers were a powerful husband and wife team of occultists who'd decided to catch Eliza and drain off her mystical energy. A nasty, slow and painful process.

They probably hadn't been planning to kill Asher, but he hadn't known that. Paranooids could be dangerous, but sometimes they were useful.

"Don't lie to me girl, I can smell the betrayal on you. Many have tried to kill me and all have failed. This Emma will fail too and be dead by sunrise. Or I might let my creatures play with her for a while."

"After all these years Asher, how can you think I'd betray you?"

Bluff only works if the other person still has doubts. By the look on his face, she knew he meant to kill her. Eliza had a few tricks she'd learned over the years. Secret tricks that no one knew about.

"Now your lies become boring." He hissed. "Emma will die.....First it will be your turn to feel my anger."

Something else Eliza had always coveted was the ring on the small finger of Asher's left hand.

Several powerful spells, all instantly ready without the usual incantations or rhyming repetitions. She'd seen him use the spell aimed at her before. A hybrid of styles and abilities, part fire and part pure chaos. If she'd still been where it was aimed, she'd have either been sent to hell by a purging fire, or turned into something nasty and unnatural. Luckily she'd moved as soon as she'd seen Asher's left hand twitch.

"Ahhhh.....New tricks is it gutter child." Yelled Asher. "The door of flames is closed to you now. Go on, please try to escape that way. You can't avoid me for long in my own chambers."

Eliza kept some spells ready, handy for life or death situations. She pictured them as though they were weapons, hanging up on a wall in her mind. The new trick was a way to instantly vanish and reappear anywhere her eyes could see. Only useable twice without draining her ability to cast any spells for an hour and its range was limited. The spell had saved her though, placing her behind a stone column near the door of flames.

"Tricks.....Always more tricks with Jenks the whore.....I see you girl."

He was lying, trying a silly bluff. She could hear him, walking in completely the wrong direction.

Ghosts are almost impossible to detect if they want to hide. Eliza had even managed to hide from Hermione for a while and she was one of the best detectors she'd ever met. No body heat, no breathing, no noxious gasses produced by bodily functions. Asher could detect her energy, but she had a few other tricks to stop that. It wouldn't last long, but for now, she was invisible to the angry occultist. She knew Asher well, too damned well. She was going to use invisibility, silence and his own paranoia against him.

"I see you Eliza." Yelled Asher.

Another lie, he was to her left, up near the door to where he slept. She'd joined him there a few times, before realising sex aggravated his paranoia rather than soothing it. There was the sound of a spell detonating and a wall of hot air hit her. Asher using a fire spell, a powerful one.

"So..... Really not there..... How about there street urchin?"

Another detonation and another wave of hot air. The detonation had been so powerful, she'd seen a plaster cherub fall from a corner of the ceiling. There was a chance Asher might bring half of Orchard House crashing down into the caves. That didn't fit in with her plans and Emma's need to capture Asher Benedict alive.

"I will kill you girl, there are only so many places to hide.....Unless...."

When Asher began to whine and whimper, she knew the plan was working.

"No.....No..... It's not fair.....You can't have escaped."

He whimpered like a dog chained outside on a cold wet night. Eliza strengthened her invisibility spells and remained still and quiet.

"You did, didn't you.....You escaped." He yelled.

Eliza heard him shuffling towards the door and risked having a look past the edge of the pillar. There was the mighty Asher, whimpering and examining every inch of the door. He began to mutter and mumble to himself.

“She can’t have escaped.”

“No, it’s impossible to get past the door.”

“No one can survive the flames.....No one.”

Like a petulant child, he hammered his fist against the doorframe.

“She did, she did.....I know it.....The bitch got through the door just in time.”

“I have to know, I can’t not know.”

Still hovering a foot above the ground, Eliza carefully and slowly moved until she was behind Asher. As he turned off the door of flames, she could see a fair distance down the corridor. Dangerous of course, she’d still be well in range of his destructive spells and his creatures were likely to attack her on sight. It was her only way out though. As Asher whimpered again, she instantly moved herself to the furthest point she could see down the corridor.

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Ideally Emma would have liked to summon a dozen shadows to Orchard House, but the creatures of the glade were limited to that area. She’d never tested it, but had the impression that just north of Enstone was about as far the shadows would travel if summoned. It was just the three of them exploring the old house, Tommy, Hermione and herself. Eliza was supposed to be looking for Benedict’s lair, though she hadn’t reported in yet.

“We’re going to ignore upstairs.” Said Emma. “Asher Benedict is too good to get caught upstairs with no way out if he needed it. He’ll be in the deepest place we can reach and there’ll be a back entrance for emergencies.”

“There are stirrings in the lower parts of the house.” Said Hermione. “Not human, but almost human and their numbers are growing.”

“A few extra dark souls are always welcome, I’m carrying the Stone of Sárk.” Said Emma. “The main prize is Benedict though.”

The Stone of Sárk had been one of James Maynard’s finds in the deserts of Libya. A soul stone of immense antiquity and capable of storing the essence of a hundred dark souls. Emma had seen the old yew trees in the glade burst into fresh life, as she’d offered the contents of the soul stone as an offering. Not that Benedict was intended to go into the stone. His fate was to be held against one of the standing stones by the shadows, while Emma plunged a ceremonial dagger into his unclean heart.

“Better the blood of Benedict than my brother.” She mumbled.

Too loud, Hermione had heard her. Her ghostly friend merely smiled and nodded at her.

“This place is huge....Where do we start looking ?” Asked Tommy.

“Everywhere, every room on this floor.” Said Emma. “Until Hermione finds the stairs down for us.”

“I’ll find them.” Said Hermione.

One corridor with ripped carpet and damp walls looked much the same as any other. Emma chose one almost at random and entered the first room on her right. There had been furniture once, a desk that had been destroyed, the wood used in the fireplace. Several empty food tins littered the floor and several used syringes.

“This place is a shit hole.” Said Tommy. “Surely every room can’t be like this.”

“Don’t let the crap décor make you underestimate our enemy.” She said. “I’m told this house has a reputation going back at least a hundred year, a bad reputation. Several satanic cults have used the

house, often coexisting with those on the outside of society. There is a real power here; dark energy almost seeps out of the walls. I suspect most of that energy is centred around Asher Benedict.”

“You’d just think he’d have.....Done something about the mess.”

“He probably likes it like this Tommy.”

Emma never made it through the open doorway of the next room, the smell of corruption was simply too overpowering. The rotting carcass of a dead dog in the centre of the room made an insane kind of sense too.

“This place needs demolishing.” Said Tommy. “No..... Make that burning to the ground.”

“The poor dog was probably injured somewhere else and drawn here to die.” She said. “Burn Orchard House down and the energy will still be here. It’s had long enough to get deep into the stone foundations and even the ground below.”

The next room had probably been pretty once, with an ornate plaster ceiling with cherubs in every corner. Pretty if there wasn’t a brown mould growing over the cherubs and the smell of rotting wood. The painted mural on the wall had probably been beautiful, until someone had smeared it with something unpleasant. Tommy seemed about to try and clean some of it off.

“I wouldn’t touch that Tommy..... It’s probably human excrement.”

“Ughh.... If there’s time can we please burn this place to the ground ?”

“I’m beginning to think that sounds like a good idea.” She said. “I think we’ll avoid the smaller rooms, but my police contact said the old conservatory was worth seeing. I suspect he might have meant that as some sort of police gallows humour. It’s at the back of the house.”

There was a hole in the floorboards on the way, a reminder that the old house had dangers not associated with satanic cults or insane occultists. Emma’s flashlight illuminated what looked like the floor of a cave, a long way below their feet.

“A way in if we had caving equipment.” Said Emma. “I’m hoping Hermione finds us stairs that go all the way to the bottom.”

“This place is a death trap.”

“It is, so be careful and walk where I walk. I have a few tricks and spells to avoid being a gooey mess on the cave floor below. Come on, let’s find that conservatory.”

That too had probably once been beautiful. Emma could imagine house parties, with the lady of the house showing off the tropical palms. Perhaps there had even been butterflies living among the lush green foliage. The palms were now rotting stumps, the lush foliage a thing of the past.

“Surely the police couldn’t.....How could they just leave it hanging there ?” Asked Tommy.

The glass walls had been shattered in places, allowing the South Wales winters to get inside. The once gorgeous conservatory flower beds were now nothing but mud and old stumps. Hanging from the one complete wall was a gory skeleton, a human skeleton tied to an upside down cross.

“Satanists, though I suspect the drunk guys on a Saturday night kind.” Said Emma. “The skeleton looks a bit too fresh for something that’s probably been hanging there for decades.”

“I want a closer look.”

Tommy braved the mud, though it did cover the top of his usually immaculate boots. He actually gasped as he prodded what looked like a red and bloody knee joint.

“It’s fake.....A good one, but definitely fake.” He said.

“Saturday night Satanists out for a little fun.” Said Emma. “They think it’s harmless, yet say the wrong phrase from the right book and..... Their choice though. Their ridiculous ceremonies also build up the store of energy for Benedict to use.”

“We can at least cut this disgusting thing down” Said Tommy.

The Satanists had used wire to fix the fake skeleton to the cross and thick nylon ropes to hang the cross from the wall. Tommy had only managed to cut one rope, leaving the cross hanging at an angle, when they heard what sounded like an explosion. A few seconds later an agitated Hermione was there, her glowing aura now more red than the usual white.

"I found the way down." She said. "There are creatures down there, human but not human. He's down there too, Asher Benedict. He's using spells, dangerous spells to use underground. I think he might be trying to kill Eliza.

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Tommy Milner had no idea why he'd volunteered to investigate one part of the cave system, while Emma and Hermione went another way. Part of it had probably been bravado. Much to his surprise Emma had agreed.

"You've got the shotgun and we can cover more ground if we split up." She'd said.

Hadn't the girl seen any horror movies? Splitting up to cover more ground translated to making it easier for the mad axeman to get people alone to swing his axe. His offer had been genuine, though a big part of him wished Emma had said no. We'll be safer keeping together was the reply he'd been hoping for.

"Christ! That's what Hermione meant by human but not human." He muttered.

A woman in a dress that had probably once been quite pretty. Vomit down the front had ruined whatever look the wearer had originally been going for. The stain at the rear didn't leave much to the imagination either. No words, the woman simply began screaming like a banshee when she saw him.

"Stop that!" He yelled. "I am armed and I will shoot you."

Not content with screaming and ignoring the request to shut up, the woman began to run at him. He noticed half her face was covered in mud, as she built up speed.

"No.....I'm not having that, even if you were once a woman."

Just one shot from the shotgun, he fired a single cartridge of clergy blessed silver pellets. The pellets hit the woman in the centre of her chest, causing her to cry out, but not stop. No messing about, Tommy aimed the second shot at her head.

"Right between the eyes." He muttered.

There was no need to fire again. The charging creature hit the wall of the passage and collapsed onto her knees. The noise she made was incredible, a scream higher than any human voice could achieve. Tommy walked closer, dangling his large crucifix in her face.

"Be quiet unclean one." He said.

The woman burst into flames. All of her, every part of her was on fire at the same time.

Unsurprisingly her screaming increased in volume. Tommy knew it was the silver pellets finally working, but just for a few seconds..... He felt vindicated for carrying the heavy crucifix and a little resentful of Emma's teasing about it. Tommy jumped back as the flames suddenly stopped.

"Damn thing..... Didn't even die right."

No human body should have burned that fast. As the flames ceased they allowed him to see a small pile of smouldering ash on the passage floor. All that was left of the human but not human, was barely a cupful of hot ash. No time to enjoy his victory, two more of the creatures had probably been attracted by the screaming and sound of his gun.

"No pissing about now, a head shot each." He muttered.

Tommy aimed his shotgun at the closest creature and fired.

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Emma Hooper had tried out the Ebony rod, though using it against tree stumps and rocks wasn't ideal. As she pulled it out of her backpack and held it like a weapon, she had no real idea what it might do to a living target, or an undead one.

"Benedict really does seem to love the stink of corruption." She said.

The section of caves they were in had damp floors covered in some kind of rotting vegetation. Orchard House seemed to have its own type of oozing brown mould, which dripped from the walls. The stench was the overpowering thing though, the dreadful stench of decay and death.

"Only the unclean would choose to live like this." Said Hermione.

"Tommy wants the place burned to the ground.....I just might grant him his wish. A little well placed hellfire would bring the entire house crashing down to bury these caves once and for all. After we have Asher Benedict of course."

"I see one of them coming Emma, one of the creatures he created."

Not just one, three of the creatures came into view, screaming as they saw her. Humans once, probably what was left of the street people Asher Benedict had once chosen to share his home with. Two women and one huge bull of a man, all dressed in filthy rags.

"If these are the guards Benedict sends against me.....I'm a little insulted." Said Emma.

She held up the rod, aiming it at the closest creature. She'd instinctively known how to use the ebony rod, as though the skill had always been at the back of her mind. In truth it was probably something pulled from the mind of one of the dead witches she'd killed in the cellars of Glade Hall, perhaps from the mind of Eloise Ward herself.

"Keep behind me Hermione.....I'm not sure of the spread with this thing."

It could so easily have been Eliza Jenks feeling the destructive power of the rod. As Emma was about to activate the rod, the dead witch hurtled across the cave, getting between her and Benedict's creatures.

"Asher knows....He knows I betrayed him." Yelled Eliza. "He wants to kill me. Would have if I hadn't kept quiet and still.....Oh, so still I kept."

Ghosts could panic; Emma had seen it many times before. Emma had a skill which seemed minor, but it often surprised agitated spirits. She put her hands on Eliza's shoulders, squeezing them as though the dead witch was a real, solid, breathing human girl.

"Calm yourself Eliza, you've done well. I don't expect you to face Benedict again, just tell me where he is?"

"I don't think I could face him again. He hates me and Asher always gets a terrible revenge on those who betray him."

"Not this time Eliza, I promise you. Oh, these damned brutes aren't going to wait for us to finish talking. Don't go anywhere Eliza."

"I won't."

The cave wasn't that large and all three of Benedict's creatures were running at her. Emma raised the rod again and used the mental trigger to activate it. It had been a white jet of pure energy when aimed at a tree stump. Now the entire cave was filled with an intense white light. Emma was dazzled and she could hear Eliza wailing in fear. The creatures had died a true death, she'd felt a slight increase in the weight of the soul stone around her neck. Of their bodies though, there was no sign.

"Please use that on Asher." Said Eliza.

"No, I want him to be alive when he's offered to the old Gods."

Emma held Eliza's hand, which seemed to shock the dead witch.

"Now, tell where I'll find Benedict? Clearly Eliza, tell me how to get there?"

“Across this cave and into the passage beyond. You want the second passage on the left and then the third on the right. All the way along that passage until it enters a large cavern. Asher’s lair is on the far side of that cavern. He’s protected by a door of flames.”

“Oh, I’m good at handling fire Eliza. Now please go and find Tommy, he’s down here somewhere. Help him kill Benedict’s creatures, but keep him well away from the main battle. Can you do that for me ?”

“Yes, I’ll find him.”

“And don’t tell him I sent you to keep him out of trouble.”

“I won’t.”

Eliza left and Emma was left alone with a patiently waiting Hermione.

“I don’t want to kill Benedict, so I’m now relying on you getting close enough to open the jar. The contents of the soul stone will make a good offering, but giving them a living Benedict..... For his blood they’ll probably leave my brother alone until he’s a teenager. Don’t worry Hermione, they’ll ignore you and go straight for Asher Benedict.”

“I thought they were a myth.....Are there many in the jar ?” Asked Hermione.

“Enough to get the job done. Some things thought to be myths are true, and some things thought to be true are myths. Just hide and get close before taking off the lid. I’m relying on you Hermione.”

“I won’t let you down Emma.....The night I looked after Jerry Jnr in the barn....He feels like my little brother too.”

Emma hugged Hermione, it might be the last chance if things went badly wrong.

“And don’t break the jar, they might be useful again one day.”

There were quite a few of the dead street people on the way to Benedict’s lair, all their darkened souls added to the Stone of Sárk, which hung around her neck. The soul stone containing the essence of his creatures would be a provocation to Asher Benedict. Emma hoped to provoke him enough for his attention to wander and miss Hermione. Eliza’s directions were perfect, they were soon stood in front of the door of flames and burning.

“I’ll absorb the fire and take it into myself, it might be useful.” Said Emma. “Hide once the door is open, make yourself as invisible as you can. Don’t worry about me, just stay hidden and use the jar....You have to use the jar.”

“I will, though they do scare me. Sometimes I think I can feel them in there, wanting to be free.”

“I’ll let you into a secret..... They scare me too. You have to let them out though.”

“I will Emma.”

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Hermione ignored the waves of heat and the explosions that followed Emma entering Benedict’s lair. The ground vibrated, dust fell from the ceiling above her. There was even growling, as if the paranoid occultist had set a wild beast on Emma. Hermione ignored it all, while applying and then reinforcing, layer after layer of spells to make her what her mother would have called a perfect child. Hermione was making herself unseen and hopefully unheard. She also hovered a little off the ground, so as not to disturb any dust on the floor. The door had gone, the flames absorbed by Emma in a way Hermione knew she’d never understand. Once inside Asher Benedict’s throne room, sounds began to accompany the vibrations and waves of hot air from detonations.

“I really will eat your eyes girl !” Yelled Benedict.

She found a pillar to hide behind to avoid being hit by crossfire. A large dead creature lay on the ground in front of a throne of carved red wood. The beast had the body of a large cat and the head

of a wolf. A trap Emma had triggered perhaps, or something unnatural conjured up by Benedict. No matter where the creature had come from it was dead, its lifeless eyes turned towards the ceiling. "You're going to die slowly Emma Hooper." Shouted Benedict. "Then I'll seek out your brother and those sanctimonious parents of yours. Cousins too, your whole bloodline will feel my vengeance. You.....You a mere child.... Dared to attack me."

Hermione wasn't surprised that Benedict was insulting Emma, Eliza had told them about his unpleasant habits and foul temper. As per their hastily put together plans, Emma wasn't going to reply to his threats, or talk to him at all if possible.

"You will suffer for killing my pet."

There had never been any hint that the battle was going to be easy, even if Emma had absorbed the skills of several powerful witches. The danger to Emma became obvious when Benedict managed to hit her with some kind of incendiary spell. Emma's backpack burst into flames, causing her to drop it. "Next your pretty hair girl.....I'll scorch it off your head, your scalp along with it."

Surely some of Emma's reluctance to fight back had to be part of her plan? If Emma excelled at one thing, it was her almost symbiotic relationship with fire. As if to prove a point, she aimed her index finger and Benedict's shoes began to smoke, before bursting into flames.

"Stupid.....Ridiculous children's party tricks.....Is that all you've got?"

Despite calling them tricks Benedict had to use a spell to stop his shoes from burning, while Emma simply smiled at him. The occultist looked rattled, probably realising it might have been far worse than just his shoes.

"You have a certain naïve talent.... Far better than Eliza. I could teach you, if we were allies."

They had pre-agreed signs and when Emma pretended to wipe something off her jacket, it meant 'move,' Move to where though? Benedict began to wave a sword about, while Emma aimed fire in his general direction. Just moving without getting scorched or cut was going to be tricky. Slowly Hermione moved round and behind Benedict, though there was no convenient pillar to hide behind. "I'm quite willing to kill us both. Are you willing to die Emma Hooper?"

"If that's what it takes."

Her only reply and it seemed to surprise Benedict as much as it surprised her. Benedict used a force spell against one of the supporting columns for the ceiling. It cracked and bowed out at the centre.

"I mean it girl.....Neither of us will survive."

Emma's only answer was to use an even more powerful force spell to crack the column apart. The ornately carved ceiling began to crack apart, as the huge stone column collapsed.

"Stupid..... Crazy girl."

He'd been bluffing of course. No one with an ego that large ever seriously considers suicide. Emma picked at her left ear, the signal for 'move in, do it now.' There was no safe route, no path that guaranteed she wasn't going to be scorched to a crisp or crushed like a bug. Hermione reapplied the spells to keep her invisible, as she slowly moved closer to Benedict.

"What do you want?" Asked Benedict.

"Your blood, everything is about the blood.....Always."

The occultist used his powers to lift a huge cloud of dust and rubble from the floor, spinning it about, before aiming it all at Emma. No dodging, no use of a defence shield. Emma let it all hit her and stood her ground, almost up to her knees in rubble. She stepped out of and over the rubble, shaking the dust off as she faced Asher Benedict.

"Is that the best you can do?" Asked Emma.

She sent some of the rubble back at him, aimed at his knees. As Benedict fell, Hermione stepped up behind him and opened the jar.

“Meet the children of Ammit.” Said Emma.

The children of Ammit, devourer of the dead. Hermione had learned about all the mythical Egyptian Gods. They’d been very popular in Victorian England. To find out that not only was Ammit real, but so were her legion of tiny children.... Hermione still couldn’t quite believe it. The tiny creatures resembled their mother, part lion and part crocodile. They swarmed all over Asher Benedict, biting and pulling at his flesh. He had no protection against them and looked terrified.

“Don’t worry I won’t let them kill you.” Said Emma.

When the pool of blood on the floor began to grow dangerously large, or at least dangerous for the life expectancy of Benedict. Emma moved her hands in a certain way and the children of Ammit flooded back into the jar.

“Cause me any more trouble Benedict and the lid comes off again.”

He didn’t struggle, even as Eliza returned and took great pleasure in binding him in the filthy ropes from the conservatory. Hermione crouched down and looked into his eyes, wondering why she’d ever been scared of him.

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The rain seemed appropriate for the occasion. Midnight a few days after the mysterious destruction of Orchard House, or at least mysterious to the reporters who’d covered the story. A fire so furious and destructive that it had cracked the stone foundations, causing the old house to fall into the cave system below.

“I bring an offering of many tainted souls.” Said Emma.

She placed the soul stone against the standing stone, causing it to release the souls of Asher Benedict’s creatures. The stone glowed pure white and Emma felt the ancient yew trees respond. She couldn’t see the fire damage being restored, but she knew it was happening. The souls were a good offering, but the old Gods wanted blood....Always blood.... Blood was everything.

“I now offer you blood, the blood of one of the most powerful surviving practitioners of the dark arts. Bring him forward, bring Asher Benedict to the stone.”

The shadows brought him forward. Eliza and Hermione were there and even Tommy was lurking at the edge of the glade. Emma could see the old Gods among the trees. They were watching, waiting, eager to taste the blood of someone so ancient and powerful.

“Bind him.....Tie him with his back to the stone.” She commanded.

“It’s not too late.....I could teach you so much.” Begged Benedict.

Emma watched him being bound, while she held the ceremonial dagger. The very same dagger she’d come so close to using on her little brother. When he was bound and gagged, she moved close and put the wicked looking blade against his chest.

“You don’t understand Asher. They want your soul and your blood, everything is about the blood. All the knowledge in your head will be mine, everything you’ve learned during a very long life....It will all be mine.”

Emma pushed at the blade and then pushed harder, driving it through his ribs and into his heart. She pulled out the blade, allowing his blood to pour over the standing stone, drenching the grass below. The blood was all for the old Gods, though Emma did taste what was left on the blade. His blood tasted good, it tasted of power.

“Enjoy this offering.” She shouted. “I will bring you many more.”

Both standing stones were glowing bright enough to light up the glade as though it was sunrise on a spring morning. Emma could see Hermione as a young girl and Eliza Jenks as she been in life, complete with a knowing grin on her face. The old Gods weren't of this reality, seeing their true form could be disturbing. She looked at them though, giving them a slight bow.

"Your offering is received and appreciated." She heard in her mind.

There would be other offerings, mainly of tainted souls. She done enough though, she was confident of that. They'd now leave Jerry Jnr alone until he was old enough to decide whether he served the old Gods of the glade, or he wanted to walk another path.

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~ The End ~

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This is the first in a series of short stories about Emma Hooper and her involvement in the dark side of the occult.