

Moondance of Stonewylde

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Extract

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Swathes of silver light streaked the north-eastern skies, and in the cool dewy twilight Stonewylde slept soundly. On the dirty flagstone floor of a tumbledown cottage an old crone hunched stiffly, rocking as she crooned her incantation. Five points were marked on her circle with stubs of candle and symbols of the elements. A large leather-bound book lay open, the spidery writing faded on the parchment. The glossy crow sat in her lap with eyes shut. Mother Heggy muttered and poked at the small fire. With a shrivelled hand she flung a quantity of dried essence onto the smouldering sticks. A foul-smelling smoke billowed into the air and hung in wreathes about her. Her other clawed hand was clamped around something soft and malleable. Something vaguely human in shape, fashioned from wax, pig fat and a few ginger hairs. This mommet had a strange heart. In its centre lay a crescent of human toenail, yellow and horny.

Smoke choked the cottage and the crow fidgeted in the crone's lap. Her mumbling invocation gathered in power. The mommet became softer, the heat from her leathery skin transferring its energy along with that of the spell she cast. She scraped the remaining dry powder from a dish; 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 bruised and battered and his heart seething with dark hatred. The crop of Sickener from the beech grove was unrecognisable as this desiccated essence which she now used to empower her spell.

She uttered the final words, no longer legible to her in the 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 mommet into the fire. 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 glimmer of dawn.

CHAPTER ONE

Magus sprawled across the vast four poster bed gazing at the bright latticed 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, Midsummer's Day, should have been a day of glory. His birthday, and a special one this year as he had much to celebrate. Instead – ruined. The arteries in his temple pounded as he remembered the look of triumph in the dark haired brat's eyes. The green magic had eluded him, the Magus, the rightful guardian of Stonewylde and recipient of the goddess' bounty. Normally he'd have been teeming with power and energy after receiving her gift. 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 boy would suffer for this latest example of insubordination.

He recalled how all day yesterday after that disastrous sunrise ceremony Yul had excelled at the games held on the Village Green. Despite those gruelling weeks spent at the quarry, which should have broken not only his body but also his spirit, the boy had outstripped many others in countless competitions. Magus had been angered to see Sylvie watching with shining eyes, cheering him on – not that he'd needed it. Magus had a horrible suspicion that not only had the Earth Magic failed to empower him, but had somehow gone instead to Yul. That would explain the boy's brightness and energy.

Magus smiled grimly as he recalled how he'd put an end

to the boy's apparently unstoppable success. He'd waited for the right moment. Yul stood alone under the shade of a tree on the Village Green, still flushed from the exertion of winning a race. Magus recalled with pleasure how the boy's deep grey eyes had clouded with fear as he noticed 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 have been here today. I don't recall giving you permission to leave the quarry."

"No, sir."

Magus' lips twitched as he felt the boy begin to tremble. He was hot and full of energy, but that trembling said it all.

"So why take it on yourself to leave Jackdaw and your friends at 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 trestle tables of drink. 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 by sheer clumsiness, but then have the effrontery to speak *my* words? Who the hell do you think you are?"

Yul shook his head helplessly. Who was he? Someone special and magical, as Mother Heggy had 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've been a thorn in my flesh for too long, and I shall pluck you out and grind you underfoot. You are forbidden to have any contact whatsoever with Sylvie from this moment on. You should never have left the quarry without my express permission. I'm very tempted to send you straight back there, especially in view of your appalling clumsiness this morning at the ceremony. However, I think you'll be of more immediate use up at the Hall, where I find we are a little short-staffed. You'll report to Martin in the morning, first light, and do whatever work he directs you to 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. All his earlier vitality and spark seemed to have been doused, and 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 could not 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 one 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 over his trousers. Here was the means of keeping Yul down – and maybe even finishing him off altogether. Alwyn hated the boy with a vengeance and just a few words of encouragement from Magus 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 today and he had a gift for her.

He thought of the box waiting up at the Hall. Inside the layers of white tissue lay a dress so beautiful and perfect for her that his heart lifted at the memory of it. She'd wear it tonight for the Midsummer Dance and would eclipse everyone, Villager and Hallfolk, with her radiance. Sylvie was special and needed delicate grooming. She was fifteen today and although birthday gifts weren't usually given at Stonewylde, Magus had decided to make an exception. She'd never had much, if Miranda's pathetic life story were to be believed, and the exquisite dress would be worth its cost if it made the girl happy.

He saw Sylvie talking to Dawn, one of the older Hallfolk girls, and watched as they joined a group of youngsters heading apparently for the beach. He decided against speaking to her yet – the dress could wait till later. He recalled her promise to him 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 for him to steal Sylvie as well.

As he lay on the vast bed with the sunlight streaming in on him, Magus' thoughts jumped again to an event that had happened a little later in the day, as people were wandering off the Green. The Midsummer Dance would be starting a little later, with a feast laid out on the Green, and music and merry-making in the Great Barn. He'd noticed Alwyn stomping off up the lane towards his cottage, and had called over to him. 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. He'd become monstrous. Close up, the ruddiness could be seen as 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."

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

Alwyn's face flushed a deeper shade of crimson.

"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 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 is he 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. Don't let me down. 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 – that's up to you. 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 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 once more Yul had foiled him, though he was at a loss to see how. What had happened? Was the boy responsible? For Alwyn lay now in this very building and looked as if he'd never raise a whip again in this life. Angrily Magus padded through into his black marble bathroom and wrenched the shower on full blast. He groaned as the cool water hit his body, letting it drench his blond hair and run 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. The boy would be dealt with. Turning off the shower, Magus smiled grimly to himself. As he rubbed his body briskly and reached for his exotic cologne, he met his own velvet-black eyes in the mirror.

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

Earlier that day, wearing rough work clothes, Yul had stood in the vast cobbled yard at the back of the Hall waiting for Martin to appear. It was pearly grey in the twilight, the sun not yet risen. Yul shivered. He'd had no breakfast for he hadn't wanted to wake his sleeping family. He yawned in the chill air as all around him the birds sang their divine dawn chorus. After what seemed like a long time, Martin 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. He was dogged rather than quick witted, relentless rather than efficient. Martin had served at the Hall since he was a lad and enjoyed a special

status there. He had no humour or warmth and was intensely loyal to Magus.

"Ah, there you are," he grunted sullenly, as if Yul was late. He came outside into the yard and looked Yul up and down. He knew the boy, for everyone at Stonewylde knew everyone else, but acted as if Yul was a stranger.

"Master has warned me about you," he muttered. "Don't try any of your tricks with me, sonny, I'm telling you. Just do your job and you'll be alright. But mess me about or try to skive off and Magus will hear about it. He particularly 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 after that, get yourself 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 trying to remove some baked-on grime from a huge saucepan. His thoughts turned to the events of yesterday, Midsummer's Day. It had been one of the most amazing days of his life – a turning point he was sure. First that incredible experience as the sun rose over the Stone Circle and the Green Magic pierced his soul. He'd never, as long as he lived, forget the look of 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. He recalled the kiss they'd shared the previous night under the yew tree on the Village Green. He relived that moment when he knew with absolute certainty that they belonged together. The sight of her smiling at him as he competed 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. "You know, the cake Mother Heggy

made. I've hidden it just outside your gate in the undergrowth. 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 after this, Magus had taken him to one side and informed him that he was to work all during the holidays. His heart seething with bitterness, Yul had made his way home, 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 was not going to spend the rest of his life at the mercy of the 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.

"Some Hallfolk girl just gave it to me," he said. "She said it was a special gift for Alwyn and him alone."

"How strange! Must be from Marigold up in the kitchens I suppose. 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 it's come from the Hall it must be special."

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

"Aye, I understand that, my boy. Well, he'll be back 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 better 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. He'd missed his family a great deal during his exile first in the woods and then up at the quarry, and especially his mother.

They heard laughter and chatter and the front door was flung open. The rest of his family 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.

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

Too late they heard the tuneless whistling and everyone froze. Alwyn walked into a still life. In the total silence he 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?"

Alwyn grunted, his belligerent stare unbroken. Carefully Yul handed Leveret back to Rosie and straightened his back. Very slowly the children shrank away from the armchair until 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. 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 bloated skin, but Yul stared hard into the tiny pools of blue rage, feeling 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 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.

"You can fetch the strap off the hook," grunted Alwyn. "When I've done with eating this, I'll do for you. Just like the master said. There'll be no getting away with nothing this time round, you little bastard. You're in for it now, coming back like this and upsetting him. Got to do my duty by him, right enough."

He raised the 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. 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, then her eyes widened as she watched. Alwyn's skin was 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 rapidly 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 appalled silence, hands over mouths and eyes enormous. Nobody breathed. It was unthinkable; too shocking to comprehend.

Then unbelievably, Leveret broke the horrified hush. Her gurgle of laughter split the stillness.

"Quiet, child!" moaned Maizie, shaking her head in bewilderment. She sent the family from the room back to the Village Green with instructions 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 now."

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 scoured the pan in the scullery, he permitted himself another smile of pure pleasure. He felt as if shackles had been removed after a lifetime of chafing his skin. He felt as free as a swift on the summer thermals. For Alwyn lay somewhere in the Hall right now, tucked away in the hospital wing and unable to move at all. It appeared he'd had some sort of seizure, possibly a stroke, and the young doctor who'd arrived just before the Solstice said he may never recover. Yul recalled the stab of joy he'd felt on hearing this, and the difference in 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 managed to persuade her that it would be wrong not to honour the festival in the proper way. Maybe the

Goddess would give their poor father strength to recover, they'd suggested. Reluctantly Maizie had agreed to her family bathing and dressing in their finest festival clothes to attend the feasting and dancing that night.

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

Sylvie lay on the coarse sand, her fingers idly sifting through the grains as she gazed at the blue sky overhead. The sun was scorching hot on her skin and she sighed deeply. She'd hoped to spend some time with Yul over the week-long Midsummer Holiday, but he was nowhere to be found. She hadn't seen him since the night of the Solstice, when they'd managed to snatch some moments together at the dance. She smiled as she remembered that evening. For the first time in her life, she'd felt like a fairy-tale princess. When she'd returned to Woodland Cottage later in the afternoon, a large white box had been waiting on her bed. Miranda had stood in the doorway, a strange expression on her face.

"I don't understand, Mum. You said now we're at Stonewylde we'd follow the customs here and not give birthday presents."

"It's not from me. It's from Magus. There's a note."

For a beautiful girl on her fifteenth birthday – wear it tonight!

Sylvie looked up and was shocked to see her mother in tears.

"Mum! What's wrong?"

Miranda wiped her eyes and sniffed, shaking her head.

"I'm sorry – I'm just being silly. It's nothing."

"You don't mind that Magus has given me a present, do you? I'll send it back if ..."

"No, of course I don't mind," Miranda said quickly. "It's stupid, I know. It's just that ... when I think back to my fifteenth birthday, it was all so different. I was so naïve, so sheltered. My parents treated me like a child. And then not long after my birthday I fell pregnant with you and that was

that – my childhood over.”

“I’m sorry, Mum,” said Sylvie gently. “I know I’m so lucky compared to you. You had a rotten time of it.”

Miranda shrugged and tried to smile.

“Well, it’s all in the past now. And I’ve never regretted having you, Sylvie. Come on, let’s see what’s in the box. Something to wear tonight – sounds interesting.”

Sylvie untied the silver bow and lifted the lid from the box. Carefully she pulled aside the layers of white tissue paper to reveal the most beautiful dress she’d ever seen. She found it hard to breathe as she lifted the dress from its soft nest, gasping as the layers of exquisitely fine material fell from their folds. The dress was of gossamer silk, silvery grey with thin silver ribbon straps. The bodice flared out into a cloud of skirts, which ended in little points all the way round the hem, each point tipped with a tiny silver bead. But the most amazing thing was the embroidery; the diaphanous fabric was shot with silver threads depicting small crescent moons and five-pointed stars. The effect was a glint and shimmer that gave the dress a light of its own. As Sylvie held it to her it seemed to dance with a subtle silver sparkle which perfectly mirrored the strangeness of her eyes. She couldn’t speak, but stroked the dress against her body as if it had become her skin. Without a word, Miranda turned and went downstairs.

Sylvie raised herself on an elbow and gazed out to sea. Many other Hallfolk youngsters had come to the beach today, walking together along the path by the river that flowed through the Village and down to the sea. Her first sight of the beach had filled Sylvie with excitement, for it was a beautiful spot. Swans sailed grandly amongst the reeds where the river widened its mouth into a great freshwater pool, before dispersing over large pebbles and into the waiting salt water. The beach itself was a mixture of smooth shingle and coarse sand, shelving quite sharply into the sea. But the unusual aspect of the beach was its shape. It formed an almost perfect lagoon as if someone had etched out a scoop of the sea shore just to provide the people of Stonewylde with safe bathing. The water within the lagoon was very clear, for a huge low

rock at the neck guarded the private bay and kept the rough seas out. The choppy waves could be seen out to sea crashing against the rock, but inside the shelter the water was calm. About twenty young people were on the rock, looking like a herd of seals as they basked and played. Sylvie squinted against the brilliant diamonds that danced off the water. Holly and her friends were out on the rock making a great deal of noise. They'd already crowded out the Villagers who'd been there first, much to Sylvie's dismay. She'd been hoping to see Yul there.

At the dance he'd told her the bad news about his extra work duties, but nevertheless she'd hoped that he may have managed a little free time. As she lay so indolently on the beach, Sylvie thought sadly of how unfair life was at Stonewylde. Here she was, pampered and spoiled, idling away yet another afternoon in the sun with the other Hallfolk teenagers. Whilst poor Yul was toiling away up at the Hall for no reason at all other than to keep the visitors who'd flocked back for the Solstice in luxury. Given his ordeal at Quarrycleave, Yul more than anyone at Stonewylde deserved a holiday. He was still so thin, his face chiselled into new planes and hollows. She thought back to the obscene defilement of his back that she'd witnessed less than a week ago in the white marble bathroom at the Hall. The sight of those deep wheals on his skin had filled her with a pity and anger that she knew would prevent her from ever trusting Magus again. For she knew it had been Magus who'd overseen the cruelty. But at least the actual perpetrator had got his just desserts. Sylvie knew that Alwyn lay in the hospital wing at the Hall hovering somewhere between paralysis and death.

She smiled grimly at the thought, remembering the fuss his collapse had caused on the Solstice. Hazel, the young doctor who'd brought Sylvie and her mother to Stonewylde, had recently taken up residence on the estate. She'd rushed off the Village Green to Yul's cottage after his brothers and sisters had arrived breathless and distraught, gabbling that their father had thrown a fit. Sylvie had smothered a smile of triumph, guessing that Mother Heggy's cake had worked its

dark magic. She'd had to retain her composure again later on, when Magus had shot her a look like thunder as he'd heard the news. She'd been close by when Hazel returned to the Green much later and sought out Magus to give him an update.

"You're positive it was a stroke?"

"No, not positive. I'll need to do more tests. But I believe so."

"It couldn't be anything more sinister?"

"In what way? I don't understand."

"I mean foul play. Deliberate."

"No, I doubt that very much. He presents the symptoms of a stroke victim. And he's grossly overweight, unfit and he'd been drinking heavily. If anyone's to blame, it's himself."

Magus' mouth had tightened at this, and then looking up, he'd caught Sylvie's eye. His expression changed but she couldn't read his dark eyes other than to recognise his anger. Did he really suspect Yul had had a hand in his father's collapse? Sylvie hoped fervently that whatever Mother Heggy had put in the cake was undetectable.

However Magus was back in fine form by the evening and had been delighted when Sylvie and Miranda arrived at the Barn for the dance. The Village Green was lit with hundreds of tiny lanterns. They hung amongst the branches of the trees, strung on lines around the trestles set up for yet more feasting and drinking. Light poured from the Barn and the sound of lively music filled the warm evening air. Sylvie felt as if she were floating on a carpet of magic as she walked shyly next to her mother along the cobbled street leading to the centre of the Village. Her long hair hung like a silver veil around her bare shoulders. The dress twinkled as she moved, the silver moons and stars catching the light with every step.

"Perfect!" breathed Magus, emerging from the vast open entrance into the Barn. "It fits just as I'd imagined and you really are the most beautiful girl at Stonewylde. I knew you'd do justice to such a dress."

Sylvie had stood awkwardly whilst her mother remained silent. His gaze was warm and approving and she prickled with embarrassment as his eyes swept her from head to toe.

Miranda prodded her sharply.

"Sylvie!" she hissed. "Where are your manners?"

"Oh! Thank you, Magus, thank you so much. I'm sorry – it's so special I don't know what to say. I feel overwhelmed."

"A moongazy dress for a moongazy girl," he murmured, leading them across the grass to get a drink. "Happy Birthday, Sylvie. I will expect at least one dance with you tonight. And you too, of course, Miranda."

The dress had proved to be a mixed blessing, for it had aroused a good deal of attention. The Villagers gawped openly, their smiles full of admiration for the sparkling girl from the Hall. Several of the younger children had been awestruck enough to forget protocol and actually stroke the shimmering material and Sylvie's silky hair. She felt too the approbation of many of the Hallfolk boys who seemed unable to take their eyes off her throughout the evening. But Holly and her gaggle of friends were another matter, and Sylvie felt their envy like a hail of arrows. The one person whose approval she sought was nowhere to be seen. Sylvie spent the first part of the evening trying surreptitiously to locate him. As she endured dance after hot dance with an endless stream of sweaty partners, her eyes constantly scanned the crowds.

Eventually she managed to leave the revelry and escape outside into the comparative coolness of the Midsummer Night air. Even though it was late, the sky still retained daylight on this, the shortest night of the year. The sun seemed to have barely dipped below the horizon and the stars struggled to be noticed in the cerulean sky. The fairy lights all around in the encircling trees gave the Green an atmosphere of enchantment. Sylvie's heart jumped as she sensed a movement behind and felt a light touch on her hair. She smelt Yul's unique scent and her stomach melted with excitement. He stood close, barely touching, but all her senses jangled. She felt him stoop and whisper into her hair.

"I've been waiting all evening for you to come outside, Sylvie. And it was worth it. You've fallen out of the sky, a beautiful flying star that came to earth and landed at my feet."

She smiled at this poetry, her heart thudding. She felt his

breath on the back of her neck and shuddered as he gently ran his fingers down the sides of her bare arms.

"You're so lovely, Sylvie. Your dress ... it's full of moonlight and magic. You must wear it when you dance at the Moon Fullness."

She nodded and turned around to face him, gazing into his deep grey eyes. She longed to stroke his face – or better still, to fling her arms around him and bury her face in his chest. But there were far too many people milling around the Green. She read the same longing in his eyes as he lifted a strand of her hair and felt the silkiness between his fingers.

"Come with me, Sylvie. Come with me under the yew tree where we were last night. We have unfinished business there, you and me. I want to kiss you again ..."

"You know we can't, Yul," she said softly. "Last night I made a promise to Magus that we'd stay apart. We must wait until all the fuss has died down. We can't risk anything that'll make him angry with you again."

He groaned and looked away.

"I can't stand it, Sylvie. How can we stay apart? I think of you all the time, every second of the day and night. All I want is to be with you. It's unbearable knowing you're nearby but not being able to even talk properly."

"I know, but maybe ..."

She stopped abruptly as the unmistakable silhouette of Magus appeared in the light flooding out from the Barn.

"He's looking for me, I'm sure – checking up that we're not together. I'd better go back inside. Maybe I'll see you at the beach? Everyone seems to go there in the afternoons."

He shook his head sadly.

"No, he's ordered me to report to the Hall every day for extra work, the bastard! But soon, Sylvie. Next week at the Moon Fullness I'll be waiting for you in the woods and we'll go up to Hare Stone together. You can dance and ..."

"I'll be there, I promise."

She turned away reluctantly and made her way back towards the Barn, where Magus stood washed in light. His eyes narrowed as she drew closer and he reached to grasp her

arm.

"I thought we had an agreement, Sylvie? Stay away from him and so will I. Surely you haven't forgotten the consequences if you disobey. Must I remind you? Or him?"

"No, Magus," she said quickly. "Not at all."

"Good. Because you're far too special for a lout like him."

His fingers released their grip and stroked her arm idly.

"You really are absolutely stunning in that dress, Sylvie. Now come back inside and dance with me again. I think we make rather a striking couple."

Sylvie gazed out to sea but Holly and July were making so much noise over on the distant rock that she found it impossible to daydream. With a sigh she stood up.

"Coming for a swim, Dawn?"

They went in together and Sylvie gasped as the icy water lapped around her shins. Dawn laughed at her dismay.

"Freezing, isn't it? And it's warmer here in the lagoon than the open sea. But it's only June, remember. By Lammas in August it's lovely and warm. Come on – plunge in and swim fast. It's the only way to warm up."

Soon Sylvie's skin was tingling as they swam the distance to the rock. She was reluctant to reach it, dreading any confrontation with Holly today. It had been bad enough the night before, trying to avoid her gang and their snide remarks about her fairytale dress. But the girl with the bobbed hair and pretty feline features noticed them and called out.

"Hi there! Come and join us on the rock! It's so hot up here."

Dawn swam towards the smaller rocks where it was possible to climb up onto the natural platform. Unwillingly Sylvie followed. It would cause more trouble if she didn't.

As they sat dripping onto the warm stone, hair in a wet tangle, Sylvie kept quiet. Maybe today Holly would call a truce to her unpleasantness. Sylvie hugged her knees, feeling self-conscious in front of so many people. She was pleased that Buzz was away on holiday with his mother until Lammas. She could just imagine the scene if he were here now, giving her

unwanted attention whilst Holly looked on in jealousy. Holly messed about with July, Wren and Fennel and his gang, diving into the sea and ducking each other. Sylvie kept her eyes averted from their antics. She looked instead at Rainbow, who was uncharacteristically quiet today. The younger girl was basking on the rock, her sea-blue eyes faraway. She wore a bikini which shone like silver scales in the bright sunlight, with a turquoise and silver sarong wrapped loosely around her waist. Although only thirteen, she had a lovely figure, her skin already tanned to a soft apricot. Her hair was darker blond than most Hallfolk's, the heavy waves glinting with natural highlights. She'd be stunning when she was older, Sylvie thought. Curled on the rock, her hair fanned out to dry, Rainbow stared dreamily up at the sky. Then she glanced across suddenly and caught Sylvie's gaze.

"Why are you staring at me, Sylvie? What is it?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking that you look like a mermaid."

Rainbow burst out laughing at this.

"Do I really? How nice! I love mermaids."

Wren overheard the conversation and flung herself wetly next to Rainbow.

"A mermaid? They lure men away from their homes and into the depths of the watery underworld."

Rainbow laughed again.

"Well I won't be doing any of that today. None of the boys here are worth the effort."

She slipped off the silky sarong and dived gracefully into the lagoon, her silver scales sparkling in the sunlight. Sylvie shivered, and not just from the drops of water that splashed onto her hot skin. There was something about Rainbow – a kind of sinuous, calculated perfection – that disturbed her more than Holly's blatant antagonism and bullying. She thought again of Yul, trying to conjure him up in her mind. She could imagine him here, brown and lithe, putting all the pale Hallfolk boys in the shade. How he must be rejoicing today, free at last from his father's reign of tyranny.

Whilst Sylvie and the Hallfolk youngsters swam and sunbathed, Yul continued with the seemingly endless chores that Martin had lined up for him. After the pans in the scullery had been dealt with to Marigold's satisfaction, Yul was sent across to the stables. Tom was pleased to see him and smiled his welcome at the tousle-haired boy.

"I were going to clap you on the back, son, but I weren't sure if 'twas still painful."

Yul looked up at the old ostler sharply, his grin fading.

"So you know about what happened to me?"

"Aye," he muttered, "I do. I heard every single damn stroke, every crack of that whip. Magus got me to rig up the byre with that electric light afore he came and got you. I was outside while it all happened, battling with myself what to do for the best. I ended up doing nothing. I been wanting to say to you ever since how bad I feel about it."

"No need for you to feel bad, sir. It wasn't your fault."

"Well, it was partly, I'm sorry to say. 'Twas me as told Magus about you riding Nightwing that day, when the gentleman was thrown and hurt hisself. Not to get you into trouble, you understand. I thought the master'd reward you. You showed great courage riding that horse back to get help quick. Anyhow, I feel bad that I told Magus, and for not coming to help you in your suffering."

"But you couldn't have, not without disobeying Magus."

"Aye, well maybe I should have done. Starving you like that was downright cruelty. 'Tis not something I'd have believed of Magus, treating a Villager so bad. And as for that Alwyn ... I tell you, if that man hadn't been taken sick, I'd have gone for him myself. All that bragging and boasting about what he done to you, every night down the pub."

Tom shook his grizzled head sadly.

"No, I won't forgive myself for not helping you. I could've got some food to you or something. Truth is, I was scared, and I'm ashamed of that."

"I never expected any help. Magus can't be disobeyed."

"Aye, but if you're ever in any trouble, you come to me, Yul. What the master did to you weren't right and I feel I owe

you. I won't rest easy till I've made it up to you somehow."

Yul looked at Tom speculatively and nodded.

"Thank you, sir. I'll remember that."

"So why are you here now, lad? You should be down the Village enjoying the holiday with all them other young folk, not up here working. What have you done this time?"

Yul shrugged, and Tom remembered the boy doing the same last time he was sent here as a punishment, way back in March

"Like that is it, son? Right, well you'll have to put your back into it. We're rushed off our feet with all them Hallfolk visitors wanting to ride every day. Half the daft buggers don't know one end of a horse from t'other."

He tossed Yul a pitchfork and the work began. By sunset Yul was exhausted, although he decided he'd much rather be in the stables with the horses than up in the confines of the Hall itself. The place made him uneasy, and he hated dealing with the visiting Hallfolk. He resented being treated as a servant. How Harold put up with it he couldn't imagine.

It was late that evening when Martin finally released Yul from his duties, with an admonishment to make sure he was back good and early the next morning. He trudged back to the cottage wearily, ignoring the sounds of fun and merriment that drifted down the lane from the Village Green and Great Barn. The festivities would last all week, but Yul was far too tired to get washed and changed and go down to join in. All the other Villagers who had to work during the holiday were given a rota, so they could at least take part in some of the fun. But Yul knew Magus wanted him kept hard at it all week long until it was time to return to his work in the woods with Old Greenbough. Yul opened the door to his cottage and looked around. The place was as clean and tidy as ever, and his family nowhere to be seen. They must all be in the Barn, Yul decided. He breathed deeply, realising that the feeling of dread he usually experienced when returning home had completely disappeared. Except for one detail.

His mouth a thin line of bitterness, Yul went over to the door and tugged the hateful strap off its hook. Next to it,

hanging on a new nail, was the whip. Coiled like a malignant snake, it hung dark against the whitewashed wall. The plaited leather handle was thick and solid, the tail long and viciously thin. Shuddering as he forced himself to touch it, Yul pulled the whip off the wall and took both instruments of punishment outside to the chopping block. Taking a deep breath, he raised the axe above his head and swung it down hard. It felt good as the sharp blade sliced through the leather. He raised the axe again and again, overcome by a sudden destructive frenzy as the hated objects of subjugation were chopped into ever smaller pieces. The memories swarmed in his head like angry wasps, the years of pain and humiliation reaching back as far as he could remember. The strange light in Alwyn's eye as he went on and on with the punishment; he'd never forget that particular look as long as he lived. As the leather which had bitten so mercilessly into the soft skin of his back became now a jumble of tiny pieces on the block, Yul found himself screaming with fury. He dropped the axe, his body heaving. Tears streamed down his flushed face as the rage overwhelmed him. He sank to the ground. Kneeling in the dust, he cried into his hands. Harsh sobs shook him, dragged out from the dark place where he'd locked them away. All those years of injustice and fear were released. Never again would he have to face Alwyn. A lifetime of abuse had finally come to an end.

Later and a little calmer, he wandered down the long back garden looking at the masses of fruit and vegetables growing, and the dripping combs inside the bee hives. Maizie tended their produce well. He thought of how much happier her life would be now, free from Alwyn and his cruel domination of the family. He wasn't the only one who'd benefit from Mother Heggy's magic. Yul stooped and picked a few luscious strawberries, savouring the explosion of sweetness in his mouth. He thought instantly of Sylvie and felt the familiar tugging at his heart. She'd probably be in the Village right now along with everyone else at Stonewylde, and he longed with every cell in his body to go and find her. To take her in his arms and smell her, feel her silky hair and smooth skin,

drink her beauty with his eyes. And more than anything else in the world, he wanted to kiss her again. He was in a fever for her since their first kiss only two nights ago under the yew tree. But the Village was crawling with Hallfolk and Magus was everywhere. Yul must not risk angering him at any cost.

Yul stormed out of the garden and down the lane, tears welling up again in a hot, angry flow. He loved Sylvie but how would they ever find a chance to be together? Now he must work every day at the Hall, he wouldn't even be able to get a glimpse of her during the holiday that everyone else was enjoying. How could Magus do this to him? Hadn't he suffered enough? Darkness had fallen and Yul headed down to the river and sat on the grassy bank, watching the sparkling water as it flowed to the sea. He should have expected this. Had he really thought he'd get away with leaving the quarry with Sylvie? Or climbing onto the Altar Stone so defiantly and taking the Earth Magic from Magus? He tried to swallow his disappointment at losing the holiday he needed so badly, and with it his only chance of seeing Sylvie.

The willows whispered all around him, offering their sympathy and comfort. The waxing moon shone brightly again, fuller than last night. Everything gleamed in the moonlight. By the silver reeds of the river bank, fish came up to the surface, their mouths circles as they gulped at the gnats just above the water. There was a movement upstream. Yul saw the glossy head of an otter, its blunt skull clear against the water as it headed in a V shaped ripple towards the fish. It dived smoothly, long body sinuous and slick in the moonlit water, and disappeared. Yul stood up and gazed at the stars, the noise and merriment from the Village seeming very distant. He felt, as ever, alone and on the outside. The only one who'd broken through his isolation to touch his soul was forbidden to him. Alwyn might have fallen, but happiness seemed no closer.

A week later Miranda had just finished teaching her class when Magus walked into the schoolroom.

"Are you free for a while?"

"Yes!" Miranda said breathlessly, shoving her things into a pile and standing expectantly. He smiled and took her arm, leading her out through the French windows and onto the stone terrace outside. They stood and looked over the lawns, watching the swallows soaring and swooping up in the blue skies. She leant against him and he put an arm around her, holding her close. She closed her eyes in bliss, unaware that Magus was surreptitiously looking at his watch on the other wrist. A group of children ran onto the lawn with a ball, breaking the silence.

"Let's go into the formal garden," he suggested. "We can be more private."

She nodded eagerly. As they strolled around the raked gravel paths, Magus took her hand.

"Did you enjoy the Midsummer Holiday?"

"Oh yes, it was lovely."

"And still no sign of your period?"

She looked up at him quickly.

"No. I'm never usually late. I really think I am pregnant."

"That's wonderful, Miranda. Our young doctor can do a pregnancy test, if you like."

"Yes, I'd like to know for sure. I'm a little scared and worried, and ..."

He stopped and turned her to face him, tilting her chin so she had no choice but to look straight into his dark eyes.

"Why? Do you think I won't take care of you? You know how it is at Stonewylde, Miranda. Babies are considered a blessing, something to celebrate."

She tried to look away.

"What?"

"It's just ... what about us? Our relationship? I don't know where I stand with you. I know you like me and when we're together it's wonderful. But then you don't come near me for days on end, and ..."

"Oh Miranda," he sighed, "you must understand - I can't have normal relationships like other people. I'm the magus here and you know now what that means. I have to look after everyone in the community and there are hundreds of people

here. I can't commit myself to one person - it wouldn't be fair. I'm afraid that's how it is. But we can be together sometimes. And I promise that when we are, I'm all yours. This baby will be loved and wanted. Of course you could terminate the pregnancy ..."

"Oh no! I want to have your baby," she said. "As long as I know you care for me, I'll just have to accept that I must share you with the rest of the community. I suppose I have no other option really. But I am special to you, aren't I?"

He hugged her, taking the opportunity to check the time again, and chuckled.

"Of course you are. Very special. So how is Sylvie taking the news that you might be expecting a baby? She obviously knows it's mine?"

"Oh yes. She seems fine about it. Not that bothered at all. She's quite distracted at the moment."

They'd come to one of the alcoves in the clipped hedging and Magus took her in to sit on the wooden seat. He put his arm around her, his long fingers brushing her breast idly. She closed her eyes and sighed.

"Are you keeping a close watch on her to make sure she doesn't mix with that boy?"

"Yes I am, and she hasn't."

"Mmn. I still want her watched. I'm going away in a few days' time. You must ensure they stay apart while I'm gone."

"How long for? Where are you going?"

"Just business. And for less than a month."

"A month?" she squeaked.

"I have a company in London to run, remember. But I'll be popping back now and again. You must promise me you'll watch Sylvie closely and keep her well away from Yul."

"Of course, although I think you're worrying needlessly."

"Let's hope so. The other thing I need to talk to you about is the full moon business. Tell me, has she always been affected by it?"

Miranda shrugged, wanting to talk about the baby and their relationship, not Sylvie and her moon madness.

"More or less. But it was becoming worse as she got older.

I didn't realize it was happening here. I thought it was all part of her illness in London and that she'd got over it. I thought she was fine here."

"Well she clearly isn't, and I can't have her wandering around Stonewylde in the dark meeting up with unsuitable boys in the woods. Anything could happen, couldn't it? So tonight I'd like to keep an eye on her myself."

"Yes, of course, Magus. It's a full moon tonight then?"

"Yes, and I want you to let her go. In fact, come up to the Hall for supper and stay here till after the moon rise. Leave her on her own in the cottage. I promise I won't let her come to any harm. I just need to see how she behaves, what she does. I might be able to help her, of course, like I did with her other illnesses. And I also want to see whether she'll try to meet the boy in secret behind our backs, despite her promises."

He stood up briskly.

"I must be off. That's settled then, about tonight? I'll bring her home when it's over. You're not to worry, Miranda. I'll look after her."

"Of course, Magus," she said trustingly.

"Sylvie will always be safe with me," he said softly, leading her back up the garden path.

All day the tension rose within her until by early evening Sylvie thought she'd explode with it. She felt the familiar tingling inside; the increasing sense of being trapped indoors and needing to get outside and up somewhere high. She was also excited at the prospect of seeing Yul alone. It had been so long since they'd been together. She was relieved when, at six o'clock, Miranda announced she was leaving for the Hall and would be there for the whole evening.

"Are you coming too, darling?" Miranda asked innocently.

"No, I'm not hungry. I'll have a sandwich and stay here."

"Sure you'll be alright?"

"Yes!"

"You know it's the full moon tonight?"

"Do you really think I'd be unaware of that?"

"No need to be rude, Sylvie. I want to make sure you understand you're not to go out gallivanting with that boy."

"I know."

"Magus wanted me to remind you that you're forbidden to see each other."

"That man makes me sick! Who does he think he is - dictating who I can see and who I can't!"

"Don't be so rude! And anyway, I'm your mother and I'm telling you not to see Yul. You're only just fifteen and he's not suitable company for you - running around the woods and getting up to goodness knows what. It's not just Magus telling you, it's me too. I have every right to stop you seeing that boy."

Sylvie glared sullenly at her mother, hating her at that moment. She was so unfair, judging Yul only by what Magus had told her. The Miranda from the old days would have made up her own mind. And would have liked Yul.

"Actually, I'm quite surprised you're not off gallivanting yourself up at that horrible rock on the cliff with your picnics and incense. You're such a hypocrite, Mum! All I want to do is watch the moon rise in the company of someone I like. You're the one going off having sex with a man you barely know and getting yourself pregnant."

"How dare you, Sylvie! You make it sound sordid."

"Well it is sordid!"

"No it's not! Magus cares for me and he's really pleased there might be a baby. I have a special relationship with him. He told me so today in fact. Anyway, we don't know yet for sure that I'm pregnant."

"So why isn't he seeing you tonight if he cares for you so much? What happened to the moonlight picnics in the tent? The rugs and cushions on the rock? Maybe he doesn't want you so much now he's got you pregnant."

Miranda looked at her coldly, picking up a jacket for later on.

"Magus has business to attend to tonight so he won't be free to see me. I'll speak to you tomorrow about this rudeness, when you've calmed down. I won't have you talking like this,

Sylvie. You must accept Magus and stop being so hostile. You liked him when we first came here and I don't see why you've changed your opinion of him. If I'm going to be the mother of his baby he'll be a major part of our lives and you'll just have to get used to it. Have a nice evening, Sylvie, and remember to stay away from that boy. Or there'll be serious consequences."

"Good riddance!" snapped Sylvie as the door closed behind her mother. But she cheered up at the news that Magus was busy for the evening. She could enjoy Yul's company without fear of being found out. She decided to get ready now and change into the beautiful moongazy dress as Yul had suggested. She wanted to look lovely for him.

By eight o'clock Sylvie was ready. She felt a sharp thrill of excitement deep inside that was nothing to do with the lunar cycle. Half an hour later she could barely sit down. She'd eaten nothing, food being the last thing on her mind. She paced the room, her feet padding up and down the floor boards, the gauzy grey and silver dress floating out around her in soft webs. It was a warm evening, the sky almost clear but for a few small clouds melting to gold as the sun began its descent. Sylvie was frantic to get outside. Finally, she could stand it no longer. She opened the front door and stepped into the evening, breathing in the balmy golden air.

Soon I shall dance with the hares and the magic will sparkle in me like quicksilver. I shall be with Yul, the darkness to my brightness, the earth magic and moon magic joined as one.

She skipped down to the gate, her bare feet hardly touching the ground. Her hair flowed around her bare arms and shoulders like a veil of silvery-white silk. She fumbled with the gate and then she was free, speeding up the path towards the woods. But something loomed ahead blocking her way; a tall shape that grabbed her by the arms, smiling grimly into her face as she tried to wriggle away.

"Going somewhere, Sylvie?" asked Magus.