

MAGUS
of
STONEWYLDE

The First Book of Stonewylde

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Slowly, silently, the moon rose over the tower blocks. Pattered with bright squares of light, the great steel and concrete structures thrust up into the city sky like modern megaliths. Inside these teeming hives of activity, people sat mesmerised before flickering screens, busying themselves with electronic devices and gadgets.

The rising of the full moon in the night sky passed unnoticed, except by one girl. Trapped up high in her block, she stood at the window and cried for release. Like a delicate moth, she beat against the cold glass of her cell again and again, desperate for escape. As the moon grew smaller overhead, the wildness in her heart slowly withered and died.

Silent and still at last, she gazed out into the night. No stars were visible; in the city they were outshone by artificial light. Her eyes scanned the skies hoping for one bright jewel of starlight, but found only the winking of satellites and aeroplanes. She looked down. On the swarming streets far below, long white and red snakes of car lights crawled home. The slick pavements reflected a kaleidoscope of yellow, blue and green neon light; the air was heavy with relentless, droning noise. She turned from the bright window in despair, as another month of her life seeped away.

An owl hooted long and low from the dark woods. The boy climbed the hill to the standing stone at its summit, his boots glittering with frost and his breath in icy clouds about him. He hunkered down, his back against the tall monolith, and looked out towards the distant sea. The silver moon danced over the landscape and glinted in the

boy's eyes. He gazed up at the dusty white rainbow arched across the black velvet sky; millions upon millions of sparkling stars, bright diamonds flung over the cloak of night.

He sensed the movement of hares further down the hill. Creatures of the full moon, they gathered at this special stone every month and seemed to welcome his silent presence. He took a shuddering breath and touched his cheek. The cut had begun to heal, closing over into a thin scar that would mark him for life. The boy shut his eyes and hugged his knees, shivering and alone in the moonlight. Up here, by the stone on the hill, no one could touch him. Up here no one could hear him cry.

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Sylvie gazed through the barred window at the white bird of prey circling high overhead. Round and round it flew, just clearing the grimy tower blocks as it marked its territory, waiting for the moment when she became too weak to struggle. Would it then swoop low and carry her away into the dirty sky, a streak of vapour trail proclaiming its kill? She swallowed, her throat parched, and reached towards the water jug. But the coils of tubes prevented her movement. Snaking around her thin arm, they held her fast to a machine that beeped and flashed. Reality flickered in and out of focus. She closed her eyes; everything was just too much effort, even a sip of water.

Sylvie groaned as the pack of white coats approached her bed and surrounded her. A circle of curious faces – snouts, open mouths, bright eyes – watched hungrily as she lay defenceless among them. The alpha male frowned from beneath tufted eyebrows. He scanned her with a practised eye as he picked up her notes. Sylvie’s hunted gaze sought out the one kindly face in the group: a young intern who’d befriended her in this terrifying labyrinth of wards, disinfectant and needles. Hazel, fair-haired and rosy-cheeked, gave Sylvie a quick smile.

‘Comments?’ barked the consultant.

‘She’s responding quite well to hospitalisation, sir. She’s put on some weight.’

‘There’s evidence of intolerance to wheat and dairy foods; hence the eczema.’

‘But it hasn’t even started to clear, despite the diet. And she’s under-developed for her age. She’s what – fourteen coming up to fifteen? I think—’

‘Those who’ve read the case notes,’ growled the leader, ‘will know her mother was concerned about possible anorexia. She’s failing to thrive, though this could be due to acute food intolerances rather than an eating disorder. Whatever the cause, she’s clearly wasted away quite dramatically.’

‘What about ME, sir? It would account for the listlessness and inability to engage with any stimulus.’

‘Mmn, possible but not conclusive. The blood tests show no viral anomalies although she does react to all the usual allergens – house dust, pollen, exhaust particles, propellants. We’ve now concluded our battery of tests and there’s little more we can do for her at the moment.’

‘It’s as if she’s given up on life.’

All eyes turned to Hazel.

‘That’s your professional diagnosis, Doctor?’

‘No, but without the will to thrive, the body starts to shut down. It seems to me that Sylvie’s rejected everything around her. She can’t cope with the stresses of city life and now she’s become allergic to everything, even the air she breathes.’

The consultant wrinkled his nose at this. He picked up one of Sylvie’s wrists and felt her pulse, ignoring the tubes and bruising.

‘So you propose the symptoms are purely psychosomatic? The self-inflicted result of a refusal to engage with life?’

Hazel shot Sylvie a glance of apology.

‘No, not self-inflicted exactly. Rather a physical rejection of the twenty-first century and the artificial and unnatural environment we’ve created. Sylvie’s body can’t deal with it any longer.’

‘What a fascinating theory. But in the meantime, medication will continue and her diet will be strictly controlled. We’ll discharge her at the end of the week and see what happens. An interesting case, I’m sure you’ll all agree, but we need the bed.’

Later Hazel came back alone and sat down, taking Sylvie’s hand.

'I'm sorry, Sylvie, discussing you this morning as if you weren't there. How are you feeling now?'

Sylvie shrugged. Her ravaged face and pale hair against the pillowcase gave her a look of transparency, as if she were slowly dissolving into nothing. Hazel tried not to stare at the strange girl who'd fascinated her since her admission to hospital a couple of weeks ago. She knew that Sylvie had been ill for some time, and that her mother was frantic and the doctors baffled. What had started as headaches, stomach pains and depression had, over the months, developed into blinding migraines, acute vomiting and chronic tiredness. The food intolerances had become so severe that Sylvie now found it impossible to keep anything down. She was pathetically thin and fragile, her skin sore and cracked with eczema. Her allergies had reached the point where she could often barely breathe, and these frightening symptoms were exacerbated by the constant scans, blood tests and prescribed medication. Hazel knew that Sylvie was only being discharged for expediency, not because she'd been cured or even properly diagnosed.

'I meant what I said, Sylvie, though the other doctors didn't understand. You've rejected this world, haven't you?'

Sylvie's unusual silver-grey eyes met Hazel's kind ones. She knew that Hazel was almost fully qualified now and would make a compassionate doctor.

'I expect you're right,' she croaked.

'But Sylvie, you can't just give up on everything! What about school? Don't you miss your friends?'

Sylvie closed her eyes; school was the dark place of her nightmares. The very thought of those endless corridors and classrooms made her shudder. She recalled the smell of the place, the dirty hugeness of it like the lair of a hydra. No sooner had one hideous head been dealt with than two more reared to take its place, snarling and voracious for blood.

'I didn't have any friends,' she whispered, her tongue dry. 'I missed a lot of school and when I did manage to turn up, everyone seemed to hate me. They said some horrible things,

though I guess they were right. I do look weird and ugly and I'm stupid too. I could never catch up on what I'd missed and I was always so tired . . .'

'Oh, Sylvie, that's not—'

'It's okay, they weren't the sort of people I'd ever choose for friends. I'm better off away from that school.'

What she didn't add was just how bad it had become. She was the misfit in a teenage society that prized conformity. The more time she spent off school, the harder it was to go back and face the relentless bullying. It had reached the stage where she simply couldn't do it. Her illness had slowly become her whole life. And if she continued to deteriorate, her doctor had implied, it would also be the cause of her death.

Hazel looked at her with sympathy. She knew a little of Sylvie's background from the case study. The girl lived with her single mother in a tower block flat in a run-down part of the city. Hazel had seen her poor mother at visiting times, exhausted from teaching all day and wracked with fear for her ailing daughter.

'Couldn't your mum get a teaching job somewhere in the country? Maybe fresh air and a bit of healthy outdoor living would help you get better.'

Sylvie shook her head listlessly.

'We've talked about it but it's much too expensive to move and everyone's trying to leave the inner city schools. Mum's had so much time off in the past couple of years looking after me she'd never get a good reference. We're stuck here.' She was silent for a moment, gazing at the grey clouds that blotted out the sky. 'I'd love to go to the countryside though. I feel so stifled in the city, like it's a prison closing in on me, crushing me. Even the trees are dirty and grim.'

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

'Stonewylde? Is that your next hospital when you leave here?'

'No, it's a country estate in Dorset,' laughed Hazel. 'My father was born there and I visit every year. It's a really huge place and so beautiful.'

‘It sounds romantic – Stonewylde.’

‘It is! Everything’s done in the old-fashioned way, the food’s organic and the religion is . . . different. There are woods, hills, a beach, cliffs – oh, it’s impossible to describe just how special Stonewylde is. When I go back every summer I always feel whole again, at peace with Mother Earth.’

‘How wonderful,’ said Sylvie wistfully. ‘A place of healing.’

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

‘Hallfolk?’

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

‘I don’t know anything about my father. Mum refuses to discuss him. She had me very young and there’s some dark secret she won’t talk about. My grandparents chucked her out before I was born so I can’t even ask them.’

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

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

‘Hold on, Sylvie. I can’t promise anything. Outsiders are never allowed into Stonewylde. But Magus is in town and I’ll speak to him. Please don’t get too excited about it though. He’ll most likely say no.’

‘Is Magus the owner?’

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

Sylvie noticed the sparkle in her eyes.

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

Hazel smiled dreamily and patted her hand.

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

'For your next visit?'

'It's more than that. I'll be qualified then. I'm to be the doctor at Stonewylde for a year.'

'That's wonderful! Oh please, Hazel, please try to persuade him to let me visit, even if it's only for a weekend. I'd love to go there and escape from all this dirt and noise. Stonewylde sounds like heaven on earth.'

Miranda, Sylvie's mother, was not impressed when her daughter related this conversation at visiting time. She was exhausted. She'd travelled halfway across London from school, and now faced another long, cold journey back home to the empty flat after this visit. Although she was pleased to see an improvement in Sylvie, she surveyed the girl's excited face with dismay.

'You mustn't get your hopes up, Sylvie. It'll probably come to nothing. And I doubt I could even manage the cost of train tickets all the way to Dorset. I don't think the doctor should've been talking to you like this anyway. It's very un-professional.'

'She's not unprofessional! She's the only nice person here. I'm not raising my hopes, Mum, but wouldn't it be wonderful to visit a country estate? I'd love to be out in the fresh air, with the sea and the hills all around. Maybe we could go in the Easter holidays?'

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

'Oh Mum! You've always told me to keep an open mind. And Hazel asked about my father. She said ...'

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

‘No, not like that, Mum. Why are you always so defensive about it? It’s my blond hair. She thought I might come from this place, Stonewylde. She just wondered if—’

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

‘Why are you always so prickly about it?’

‘It’s a closed subject, Sylvie. You know that.’

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

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

Yul leant his forehead against the softness of the stallion’s coat, breathing in the sweet smell. He was almost asleep on his feet. Nightwing snickered and turned his head to pluck at the boy with gentle lips. Yul wearily opened his eyes and resumed grooming. This was the one highlight of his punishment; nobody got this close to Magus’ horse unless they were an experienced stable hand.

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

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

‘Never seen anything like it afore. That horse is usually evil but he’s taken a real shine to you.’

Yul nodded, proud of his affinity with the stallion. It was wonderful to groom such a beautiful horse, but he wished he could ride Nightwing too. Tom watched as the boy put away the grooming brushes and newly polished tack. He was strong and willing despite having done a full day’s work in the woods, and Tom would be sorry to see the back of him now that the week was up. He still didn’t understand why Yul had been sent here every evening. When he’d asked the boy what misdemeanour

he'd committed, Yul had merely shrugged and mumbled something about not showing enough respect.

Tom knew the boy's reputation – surly and rebellious. He'd seen the cut on Yul's cheek, which was Magus' style. The master could be a little free with his riding whip and had marked the boy quite severely. But Tom also knew the boy's father. The bruise on Yul's other cheek and the way he winced as he moved – that was surely Alwyn's doing.

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

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

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

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

'Has the boy gone already?'

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

'A pity you let him go. I wanted a final word with him.'

'The lad was worn out, sir.'

'Hard work never hurt anyone, Tom, as we both know. I hope he's learnt his lesson. Can you believe I found the boy lying about in the fields watching hares? He was supposed to be clearing undergrowth in the woods!'

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

'Yes, too much of a way. While I was reprimanding him, he actually had the cheek to stroke Nightwing! Nobody touches my horse – everyone knows that. The boy's lucky I let him off so lightly.'

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

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

'Good! There's something in that boy that needs taming – a look in his eye I don't like. He'd better not overstep the mark again.'

Yul flung himself onto his narrow bed, too tired to wash or even undress. He kicked off his boots as he lay on the worn bedcovers, the sharp slope of the ceiling preventing him from sitting upright. The tiny attic room was unlit as his mother didn't like having lanterns right under the thatch. He breathed deeply of the night air that poured in through the small window by his head, listening to the owls calling across the darkness.

The pub down the lane began to disgorge men. Their voices seemed loud in the silent, starry night as they went home to their cottages. He heard his father whistling as he stomped up the lane. Yul shuddered, his body instinctively curling up. The front door opened and closed and he heard his mother's soft voice. His father's voice was only a low murmur so she must have persuaded him to sit down for a bit of bread and cheese.

Yul imagined his father stretched out in his armchair, feet warming by the fire. The cider could make him magnanimous but more often he became irritable and even aggressive. Alwyn very rarely hit his wife or the other children; their fear usually mollified him. But it had always been a different matter with his eldest son, and lately had become worse. Yul longed for the day when he could stand up to his father. He fell asleep thinking about it, and dreamed that he and Nightwing were flying through the black sky, the moonlight on their faces and the wind in their hair.

Miranda's relief at Sylvie's slight improvement during her stay in hospital was marred by a new worry. Sylvie talked incessantly of Hazel's country home and how she longed to escape the city to

walk in the hills and woods of Stonewylde. Miranda wished that the proposed visit to Dorset had never been mentioned. The last thing she needed was an expensive trip, which, in her weakened state, might only make her daughter worse. But her hopes that it would all come to nothing were dashed when she collected Sylvie from hospital a few days later.

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

Sylvie, clinging on to her mother’s arm for support, beamed at this.

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

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

The look on Miranda’s face was almost comical. Spiritual healing! But she shrugged in resignation, not wanting to be the one to wipe the animation from Sylvie’s thin face.

‘Thank you, Doctor. We’ll meet him at least, and take it from there. Maybe, as you say, a nice weekend of fresh country air would help Sylvie.’

The meeting was not at all how Miranda imagined. Hazel picked them up a few days later and drove them to Magus’ offices in the heart of the City. The building was very grand and they were ushered in by an immaculately groomed woman. Behind a mask of professional welcome, she hid any curiosity the bedraggled pair may have aroused. Magus’ office was luxurious and the man himself was a complete shock to both of them.

Instead of the crusty old landed-gentry type in tweeds and brogues whom Sylvie had envisaged, or the bearded weirdo in ethnic clothing, crystals and sandals of Miranda's imaginings, Magus was the most attractive man either of them had ever seen. In his late thirties, with ash-blond hair and velvety dark eyes, he was tall and long-limbed and wore an expensive business suit with effortless style. His face was strong and chiselled; his manner charming and quietly powerful. Miranda rapidly changed her opinion of the whole venture and wished she'd worn lipstick. This was no sinister cult leader bent on brain-washing them for his evil ends, but a cultured and successful man. Maybe Stonewylde would be a similarly attractive proposition.

He put Miranda and Sylvie at ease, for both were flustered and shy. Like Hazel, whom he thanked and dismissed once she'd introduced them, he was fascinated by Sylvie's likeness to the residents of Stonewylde. He couldn't take his eyes off her and apologised for his curiosity with a smile. He was concerned to hear of Sylvie's illness and allergies and questioned her sensitively. His dark eyes glowed with sympathy when she hesitatingly explained her awful medical problems. She felt genuine warmth in his smile and liked the way he listened so carefully, his eyes kind and voice gentle. There was an aura of strength and security about him that she found very comforting, and she loved the smell of his rather exotic cologne.

Magus also wanted to know about Miranda's teaching career and her hopes for the future. When he learned that they didn't extend beyond finding a cure for Sylvie, he nodded.

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

Miranda refused to be drawn and Sylvie felt embarrassed by her curtness on the subject.

'I only ask because of the striking resemblance between Sylvie and members of my family,' he said gently. 'We're an extended tribe and many of us don't live at Stonewylde. I wondered

whether Sylvie's father could be a relation. I didn't mean to intrude.'

He then told them about Stonewylde, and showed them photos of the great country estate. As Sylvie gazed at the slide-show of images she felt a deep longing begin to take root. She was sure she'd regain her health if she could stay in such a beautiful place, even if only for a few days. More than anything in the world, she wanted to go to Stonewylde. She found herself trembling and tried to calm down as her breathing became jagged. Then Magus rang for tea and said he had a proposition to make.

He told them he was impressed with Miranda's values and sorry to see Sylvie's suffering. She was clearly a bright and sensitive girl, unable to cope with her difficult life in London. By luck there was currently a position available in the boarding school at the Hall, teaching English. He offered Miranda the post, with a free place at the school for Sylvie too. Accommodation, food and essentials would be included in the package. The position would initially be for a year, and he'd negotiate with Miranda's school to waive her notice. They could move down to Dorset in the middle of March. He needed to find a new teacher soon, but would give them a week to consider the proposal.

Magus sat back on the sofa and watched them, his dark eyes gleaming. Sylvie appeared to have stopped breathing and stared at him with enormous eyes, her face white. Miranda was flushed and dumbfounded, her mouth opening and closing as the implications of his offer sunk in. She looked across at Sylvie and knew what her answer must be. Their present lifestyle was killing her daughter. They had nothing to lose. She smiled reassuringly at Sylvie, knowing they shared the same bubbling exhilaration and sense of unreality.

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

Sylvie burst into tears and Magus handed her a white linen handkerchief, patting her arm kindly.

‘I was hoping you’d say that, Miranda,’ he said softly. ‘You won’t regret it, I promise.’

The next days passed in a blur of frantic activity. There was much to do before leaving behind their old life with its worry and complications of outstanding bills and rent. Even though she was exhausted, the night before their departure Sylvie found it difficult to sleep. She lay on her familiar bed for the last time, listening to the roar of the city and howls of sirens. She gazed through her dirty window at the sodium-lit night sky, where the red and green lights of aircraft flew overhead to unknown destinations. But nowhere could be more exciting than her destination. Stonewylde! At last she was to escape this prison and find the peace and beauty she craved.

Miranda too found it impossible to fall asleep despite the gruelling day she’d spent packing up the last of their things. She hoped desperately that she’d made the right decision and was now besieged by last minute doubts. But then she remembered Magus’ kindness that day in his office. He knew they were penniless and alone in the world, and how seriously ill Sylvie was. A man of his means and background would never let them down – he’d take care of them. Feeling comforted by that thought, Miranda finally slept. But her sleep was haunted by the ghost of her past. The memory replayed itself for the thousandth time, buried firmly during the day but using the dark night, as she slept, to rise from the grave.

A great red harvest moon was rising in the clear night. The autumn air was crisp and fragrant as she dared to follow the man through the woods leading away from the house. The party was in full swing behind her but she welcomed the cool darkness ahead. She thrilled with excitement. She was just sixteen and immature for her age, dressed in a sparkling white fairy costume. Her parents had insisted she accompany them to this grand charity fancy-dress ball hosted by her father’s business associate. She should’ve been demurely sipping lemonade at her mother’s side. Instead she was creeping off into the

woods with a tall stranger, tipsy on a glass of forbidden punch and not caring what happened next.

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