

Cheating The Reaper.

I have someone to thank here, but who?

I suppose I'd better start somewhere near the beginning. Just to organise my thoughts a bit. They're pretty jumbled right now; fear will do that as I'm sure you know. But whether you've ever known fear in quite the same way is a matter between you and your sanity. So to begin then – we arrived in dribs and drabs as usual, but most of us got there somewhere around teatime...

“Heya, Tess. New bike?”

“This old thing?” I laughed and ran my hand over the gleaming paintwork of my new Kawasaki Z650. Not new from the showroom but new to me, and after two weeks it was still the biggest thrill to hit the starter button and hear it roar. Made a change from kicking over my old Suzuki 125 and listening to it gurgle anyway. I looked around the campsite to see who else was there that I knew, hoping someone else would notice the new machine I was sitting astride. I pulled off my gloves and balanced them on the petrol tank, loosening the chin strap on my helmet. As I pulled it off, shaking my head to free up my tangled hair I saw a group of friends walking towards me, heading to the pub having set up their tents already.

“Tess, hi. You want a hand or've you got that quickie tent?”

“Got the quickie, but I could use a can for the bike.” A short search later, Dave handed me an empty beer can which I squashed and placed under the side-stand to

stop my bike from falling over in the soggy field. Climbing off, I stretched to ease the stiffness of the chilly ride and slapped Dave's hand away from the bike with a grin.

"No touchee touchee," I warned him.

As usual he ignored me anyway and carried on looking over my new pride and joy.

"Hmm, not bad condition," was his final verdict.

I sighed. "I'm just going to sign in," I told the gang, and stooped to enter the large tent designated as the signing in post, or 'control tent'. Scribbling my name in the book with frozen fingers, I gratefully accepted a cup of hot soup and had taken my first sip when Sally came into the tent, her face a study in smirks.

"He's here. In the pub."

"Who is?" but my innocent act didn't fool her, we'd been friends for too long.

"He's got a ton of money on the pool table, so I think we know where he'll be for the rest of the night," she added.

I grinned at her, unable to help it when I thought of his smoky blue-grey eyes, the thick dark hair that he wore just slightly too long, the tall, athletic frame and wide, happy smile that made him the people-magnet he undoubtedly was. There had always been something lurking just below the surface between him and me, and now that I was free...

"You two are *so* unfinished business," Sally spoke my thoughts aloud, and I punched her to shut her up, following the punch with a quick hug of delight.

Then I sobered. "You reckon *she'll* be here again this year?"

"Caroline?"

"Or whatever she's calling herself this year, yeah."

"Well she does live here," Sally pointed out sensibly.

The girl in question wasn't part of our crowd, but she'd been highly visible amongst us last year. She'd hung around with us all weekend, fascinating the arses off the blokes in the club, including Alex, who she'd been all over like a rash. Not that I had any right to be jealous; he was a friend and nothing more, but why'd she have to be so...*different*? It smacked of an adopted fashion statement; What can I be to grab attention? Punk is dead, Goth is dying...(ha ha, pun definitely intended) Ooh, I know, I'll be a witch. Silly cow. That thought made me feel better and I set off to unload my bike and set up for the weekend. Despite my having the 'quickie tent', the others came over to help me put it up. Or rather, supervise me. It really was a fast job though, and pretty soon I was slinging my sleeping bag and panniers inside and zipping up the front again.

"Right, who's getting the first round in?"

My heart always skipped when I saw Alex after any kind of absence, this time was no different; I hadn't seen him for a couple of weeks and as I found him standing by the window, pint in one hand, pool cue in the other, my chest did the expected flip and the initial smile I gave him was quick and embarrassed. His though, was as warm as it always was, and I felt us settling down immediately into our usual, easy friendship.

Later that evening, during a game of doubles with Dave and Sally, he asked, casually enough, if any of us had heard that the local churchyard was supposed to be haunted. Dave laughed right out load, spraying Sally's arm with frothy beer.

She slapped him, making him spill more. "Haunted? Come on, Alex!"

“All churches are haunted,” I pointed out. The Cathedral On The Moor, as Altarnun Church was known, was one of the spookiest places I’d ever been, and I’d been in a few churches in my time – choir singing made it compulsory.

“Well yeah, but not like this...you know Altarnun’s supposed to be a haven for witches?”

Ah, here we go...I knew he wouldn’t be able to help himself.

“Yep, knew that too, don’t forget you’re talking to someone who grew up about five miles away,” I reminded him, “but witches and ghosts aren’t the same thing now, are they?”

“I know, but...” he paused dramatically and tried for a spooky “storyteller” look, but the bright lights overhead and Quo on the jukebox ruined the effect. Still, he battled gamely on. “Things have been seen, late at night when the good folk of the village have been indulging in their secret pagan rites...”

“Things?” Sally was trying for the scoff, but it came out more like a tremble. Dave put his arm around her. “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you from the ghosties and ghoulies!” he snickered.

Alex sighed. “You’re just not taking this seriously are you?” he complained. We all apologised, and stood with mock solemnity, waiting for the explanation. He just grinned and shrugged, picking up his cue again and leaning over to win the game for himself and Sally.

Nothing more was said on the subject that night, but every now and again Alex would shoot me a mysterious look, tempered by the light smile that accompanied it. I was always keen on hearing spooky stories, and well he knew it, but he had evidently decided to save it for a more suitable time, perhaps tomorrow around the traditional

Saturday night bonfire. I began to look forward to hearing his voice whispering of strange goings-on and unexplained phenomena, the only downer being that the story would have, as its source, someone who I wished didn't exist. Still, even if it had come from her, she wasn't here with him and I was, so that had to be a plus. I decided not to let it bother me.

The following afternoon was fun, as always. There were silly games to play, with beer token prizes; tug-o-war, dizzy-sticks, egg-throwing and welly-wanging. There was another version of that game, using a crank from someone's backyard bits pile, but I sat back for that one and decided it was time to crack open the first can of the evening. All the while I watched Alex out of the corner of my eye, wondering lazily just how deep the feelings I had for him ran. Was it simply good old-fashioned lust, or something more? We'd been friends for so many years now that the line was blurred in my mind. Was it possible to fancy a guy to distraction, remain close friends for so long and yet not be in love with him? I supposed it must be but I'd probably never know for sure.

The evening drew in quickly after the games were finished. We collected our jackets from the various places where they'd been spread out on the wet ground, and checked our pockets for money and fags. Then, singing loudly we all trooped down the long, winding hill to the pub in the the village. That was the best part of the night, I remember; the buzzing of the party atmosphere in the air, the songs we'd been singing for years floating along the lane with us; Alex walked alongside me, I couldn't see him but the occasional brush of his leather-clad arm against mine felt great.

We reached the church, the Cathedral On The Moor, and Dave walked over to the ornately decorated gate. “So what were you banging on about last night, Alex?” he asked. Alex stopped too, and Sally looked at me with a sigh.

Reluctantly we left the rest of our party and joined the guys at the entrance to the churchyard. The singing drifted on down the hill as everyone else carried on to the pub, and I stared wistfully after them. Still, Alex was here and that made it okay.

“Well why don’t we just go in and have a look around and I’ll tell you,” Alex challenged.

I shivered; this wasn’t what I had in mind when I thought of a great night out. “Why don’t we just - not?”

“Aw, come on, Tess. You’ve always been into the whole spook thing!”

“Which is precisely why I don’t want to go in there,” I pointed out. “Look we’re wasting valuable drinking time. By the time we get to the bar we won’t be able to move, it’ll take the whole evening just to get a pint!”

I thought I had swayed them, Alex certainly seemed about to capitulate, but Dave grabbed at his jacket, pulling him up the steps and onto the path leading to the church door.

I knew this church well, had been here many times as a youngster in the church choir when I and my friends had happily spooked one another, making up tales of deeds allegedly perpetrated in the old days by fearsome ghosts and other evil concoctions. But always there had been an adult nearby to turn to, just to reaffirm the normality of everything despite our attempts to frighten each other. There had always been someone to tell us to shut up and stop being silly, that this was a *church* for

goodness sake...and there had always been lunch afterwards in a warm, brightly lit house with the TV on in the background.

But now *we* were the supposed grown-ups. There was no-one to bat us around the ear and tell us to straighten our choir gowns and get inside, no-one to restore the atmosphere to one of regular, boring old Sunday...

There was no-one.

Alex and Dave had disappeared into the darkness of the churchyard...even now I couldn't bring myself to call it a graveyard. Sally hurried after them, not wanting to be left alone, and for the same reason I grabbed at her arm and ran up the path too.

"Where'd you go?" I called.

"Over here," came Dave's voice. We found him and Alex staring at a large family crypt over by the farthest perimeter hedge. The stone was ancient, crumbling, it was just visible in the half-light from the village in the distance.

"This is where it's supposed to have happened," Alex said. "You know that girl we met last year, Hecate?"

"You mean Caroline Sampson," I reminded him drily.

"Well yeah, her. Anyway, last month they were having a kind of Hallowe'en gathering up there and she swears blind she saw...*him*."

"Who, the devil?" Sally's voice shook and she inched closer to Dave.

"No, the other one."

"God?"

I grew annoyed. “For crying out loud, Sally, she’s supposed to be a pagan! Why would she claim to have seen God?” I turned to Alex. “You’re talking about The Reaper, aren’t you?”

“The very same!” he growled, raising his hands to form a shadow-scythe above his head. “She claims she saw his outline against the side of this crypt. Just moving slowly along here and as soon as she opened her mouth to say something it vanished.”

I shivered. “Stop messing about, Alex. She was obviously just trying impress you.” I turned away. Something bothered me about the story though, apart from the fact that this meant she *was* here again this year and had already started in on him.

The truth was, it all sounded too much like stories I’d heard myself. Nothing as specific as spotting Death himself, but shapes, shadows and just plain eerie feelings were common out here. There had to be some reason for it.

“And don’t you think it’s all very convenient, that it should happen on Hallowe’en?” Sally put in, her voice stronger as she took her lead from me.

“Not convenient, natural,” Alex insisted. “Think about it – they’ve had their big Hallowe’en party for non-believers; all green paint and glowing teeth, and then much later, there’s the coven Samhain gathering, when the Celtic new year rituals are performed. The time when the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead become thin. What better time for the guest of honour to make himself known?”

There was a hushed pause, we could feel the air quivering between us, and it all made perfect sense. Then I remembered who had put all this mumbo jumbo in his head; stupid Caroline who thought it was cool to name herself after someone she didn’t even understand.

“This is just getting silly,” I snapped. “*She* tell you all this, did she? While she was busy mentally ripping off your shirt?”

I looked up quickly after I’d spoken, suddenly aware that I might have sounded jealous. In the half-light I saw Alex staring at me, an odd expression on his face. Damn, time to backpedal, to make a joke of it.

“Well I hope to goodness you rewarded her for all her efforts!” I added, nudging him with an exaggerated gesture. “You know, payment for information received, nudge nudge, wink wink.” I started back down the pathway.

“Sal, I’m heading down to the pub before they call time. Coming?”

Walking into the pub on a rally like this was always a great buzz ... knowing that before I’d got into the biker crowd, the sight that met me would have sent me running in the opposite direction. The small, low-beamed room was full of huge men and scary looking women, dressed in black leather and tatty denim, laughing, drinking and crowding against the bar as if denying access. An intimidating sight and it never failed to surprise me that I felt so comfortable in this situation. I felt a little bit sorry for any locals who were new to the area and unaware of this peaceful, annual event, but enjoyed the feeling of belonging – after growing up terrified of my own shadow it felt good to be held in just the tiniest bit of awe for a change. If only they knew how harmless we were!

I paid for my pint of cider and turned to work my way towards the pool tables, freezing as I reached the small stone step separating the two areas. Caroline, bloody “Hecate” Sampson was holding forth again, as if she was part of *my* group...and my so-called friends were actually listening to her – traitors! This year she had stepped up

the gothic/witchy look, and had drawn black circles around her eyes to make them look massive, her hair was blue-black and her mouth painted a brilliant, deep red. She must have spent hours in front of her mirror doing that lot. I looked over my shoulder as I heard the door open and heard people hailing Alex as if he was some kind of superstar – in these circles he almost qualified. People-magnet. What chance did I have?

I turned back in time to see Caroline straighten up, run a finger under her eyes to make sure her eye-liner wasn't halfway down her face, and tug her black lacy top so that her breasts were more visible. I felt the jealousy building, but Sally appeared at my elbow, her voice low in my ear.

“Tess, this is *your* crowd, luvvy. Get in there. Sparkle! these people are *your* friends...” The anger dissipated and in its place grew a warm, happy resolve. I turned to flash Sally a bright smile, and ran my hand quickly through my own loose, clean hair so that it fell outside my jacket, spilling down my back in dark waves.

Taking a deep breath I sailed in and displaced Caroline completely as the centre of attention. I made a point of greeting everyone like long lost family, and found my funny side from where it had been hidden behind the irritation at seeing *her* there.

Joking and flirting, I dismissed her in my over-the-top greetings, glancing briefly over her as if she really didn't matter at all. And when Alex joined us, pint in hand, I ignored the way she flew up to him, throwing her arms around his neck and planting a red smudge on his cheek.

All evening she hung on his every word, clapping and praising his mediocre pool skills, dancing up close to him, even when it was clear she had no idea of where the

music was going. There have always been one or two songs that he and I danced to, but this year I could get nowhere near him.

Finally it was the last record of the evening. Sally flashed me a knowing look as the opening bars to Lynrd Skynrd's Free Bird came on, and Alex and I caught each other's eye. But as we moved from opposite ends of the bar, onto the small dance floor, a black lace-clad figure appeared between us, snaking up to him and sliding her arms around his waist. Was she stupid? This wasn't a smooch record at all! I shrugged at Sally, forcing down the flare of anger at being cheated out of my traditional dance with Alex, and instead enjoyed the spectacle of her being the only one to attempt to slow dance to this song.

As I danced with Sally I kept one eye on "the Witch," smirking to myself as the tempo speeded up and while Caroline stood embarrassed, Sally and I threw ourselves into it, our hair flying, both of us knowing by heart each tiny nuance of the song and enjoying the familiar feeling of one last mega-blowout at the end of the night. I could see Alex moving away from Caroline and working his way towards us, and I clenched my fists on my knees in relief. As the music ended we caught our breath, laughing and running our hands through our hair to straighten out the tangles. Caroline was nowhere to be seen and I high-fived Sally with a triumphant grin.

All too soon the barman was calling 'time' on us and we all headed out into the chilly night for the walk back up to the campsite.. On our way up we took the slightly longer route created by weaving from side to side on the narrow road, giggling and singing just a little louder than we had on the way down, passing a joint between us.

But we weren't out of our heads drunk. And because our turns at the joint were few and far between, I can't claim to have been stoned when it happened, which was the one thing I would have clung to if I could...in any case, a little weed wasn't going to cause any hallucination on the scale that's been suggested. Still, we nod and agree, just to keep the questions from coming, questions with answers we'd rather not think about...

“Don't Bogart that joint, my friend...pass it on over to me,” sang Dave loudly and charmingly offkey. I took another deep drag and passed it to him, the bobbing light of its tip the only relief from the darkness. I exhaled in a long, luxurious sigh, enjoying the taste and, of course, the accompanying floating sensation. Humming quietly to myself I was happily unaware of anything for a moment, then gradually became aware of my feet making contact with the ground again. Once more of this planet I looked around, wondering how close Alex was, and thinking with a little smile that I might just stumble against him in the dark....

“Where'd Dave go?” Sally asked suddenly, bumping into me as she groped for my arm. I turned to see if I could discern his distinctively tall, shambling shape, but the darkness was too heavy.

“Dunno, maybe him and Alex stopped off for a whizz in a gateway?”

“He'd have told me,” Sally insisted. There was something in her voice that sharpened my senses a little, and I brushed off the lingering, pleasant haze that my brief toke on the joint had given me.

We stopped there, in the lane, realising that we could no longer hear the voices of the others around us. Several had gone on ahead much earlier to light the bonfire, but

there had been many more who'd waited til the pub had kicked out and the crowd had been large and rowdy. Now there was only the silence, broken by the rustling of the trees and a distant lorry rumbling up the main A30. I opened my mouth to express surprise, but instead swayed on my feet, feeling the ground tilt violently, the tarmac coming up and smacking into my left arm.

A second later the world took a sideways dive into chaos.

Falling, I lost contact with Sally but after a moment felt her hands grasping at my jacket, pulling me to the side of the road. She was so strong...then I heard her muffled squealing and it was coming from too far away and I knew that it wasn't her who was dragging me bodily along the lane. I struggled, my mind freezing at the thought that someone unknown had hold of me and I was completely without control.

Drugged! My drinks had been laced and I was going to be raped or murdered... I tried to yell but it felt as if my lips had melted together, and the terror of that sensation drove all thoughts of rape from my mind. I beat at the hands that gripped my leather, and tried to wriggle free of the jacket but a pair of sharp-fingered hands...*another pair, dear God*... took hold of my legs just above the knee and the pain of that nearly sent me spinning into blackness. Somehow I clung to consciousness...I had to know what was going on, I couldn't allow my mind to follow the path of my numb and drugged body.

I twisted and jerked as much as I could, feeling my jeans ripping away at the knees as they scraped along the road, and then we were in the hedge. Actually *in* the hedge, the tangled brambles tearing my skin. How could anything push through here? There

was thick, granite built wall behind all this rotting vegetation. I could taste earth in my mouth, feel the scurrying of small creatures across my face, my hair pulling out as it caught on branches and jutting roots. Then I was up against the stone, and still I was pulled. The back of my head felt as if it were being crushed, I expected to feel and hear the sickening pop of my skull giving way at any second, still the pressure increased.

Just as I felt sure I was about to die it was over.

I lay gasping and sobbing, the floor under me soft, wet and stinking. My eyes were squeezed tightly shut, tears leaking from the corners, but I already knew that when I opened them I'd find nothing recognisable. Then I remembered Sally, and forced myself to look around. As I'd feared, not the expected field on the other side of the road, but somewhere utterly otherworldly...a forest of dark, twisted trees, rotting undergrowth and slimy roots snaking their way along the sodden ground. And the light was all wrong; a translucent greyness hung over everything, giving off its own eerie light, casting shadows of bent and gnarled branches.

"Sally?" I called, my voice trembling and weak, disbelief still the dominant emotion, but the edges of my mind were frilled with the brightest terror I had ever known. I scrambled to my feet, staring wildly round for sight of my friend. I was alone. Even whatever had dragged me through into this hellish place had vanished, and I felt the skin start to creep on my arms and legs. My knees shook and I looked about for something to lean on, but the sight of those trees revolted me and I knew I'd no more go near them than I'd cut my own hand off.

What then? Where to go? The hedge I'd been pulled through didn't exist here, as deep down I'd known it wouldn't, even as I'd felt myself cast upon this sodden, reeking ground. The forest stretched away on all sides, more of the same writhing shadows, more steaming grey half-light...why did I feel the need to go anywhere at all? What was wrong with just sitting there where I'd been dropped? I was about to do just that, when something spoke inside my head – a phrase I'd read about and believed I understood, but nothing could prepare me for the reality of an *actual, living voice inside me*. It just spoke my name, still the feeling was so invasive and horrifying that I screamed and clutched at my head, falling to my knees, digging my fingers into my scalp as if I could somehow reach in and drag out whatever was in there.

Sobbing, I knelt there, gagging in the putrid filth that formed the ground in this hateful place, and clawed at my head, desperate that the voice shouldn't speak again. Instead I felt a hand on my arm and I jerked up, feeling the breath halt in my throat as I recognised the face.

Smoky, blue-grey eyes, dark wavy hair worn just a little too long ... the people-magnet. But something was wrong – Alex was there, he was drawing me to my feet, but he was fading in and out of focus and it wasn't my eyes. Oh, dear god...a ghost? Was he dead?

“No, Tess. Not yet, but I need you...” His beloved voice tore at my heart and as I looked into his eyes I saw a pain that rocked me where I stood.

“What's happening?” I whispered. “What do you mean, ‘not yet’?”

“I need you, please ...” His hand dropped away from my arm. He stepped away from me and I managed to stop myself from throwing my arms about him to pull him close again. It wouldn't have worked, he wasn't really there...

The image of him drifted further from me, and I took a step towards him.

“Alex!” I cried out, the terror reeling me in bit by bit until I felt like a shivering, silver wire fighting to evade the point at which I must snap.

“Show her, tell her ... Tess, you have to tell her. I’m not hers ...” his voice faded as he looked at me sadly. He moved further and further into the forest and with no other thought than to keep him in sight, I followed.

How long I walked, I have no idea. From all I knew time had no meaning anyway, not here. Alex had vanished long since and now there was only the soggy, reeking ground beneath my feet and the memory of the pleading in his voice. “Not yet. Show her. I’m not hers ...” and I knew that the person he was referring to was Caroline. But what power did she have over him that he couldn’t tell her himself, and what was she doing here, *wherever ‘here’ was*, anyway? These thoughts, along with terror, anger and bright, blinding hate took turns at tangling my heart and mind together as I stumbled through this forest of the damned.

Finally, exhausted and too frightened to think straight anymore, I fell to the ground, hardly even feeling the way my knees sank in and my torn and bleeding skin stung from the contact.

“Well, well. If it isn’t little miss Party Queen.” The voice was sharp, in vivid contrast with the faint, whispering memory of Alex. I dragged my head up, not the slightest bit surprised to see Caroline standing there, her black clothes and exaggerated make-up seeming fully in keeping now.

“Alright, I’m here.” I mumbled. “Who are you really?”

“You seriously don’t know? Here, maybe this will help...” she stood back, lifting her arm to show me a large clearing behind her. I strained my eyes against the peculiar light, seeing a raised dais in the middle, attended by several hooded creatures who circled it like wolves.

“It’s their duty to guard over whatever is placed on there, upon pain of death,” Caroline told me mildly, as if her mind was elsewhere. “They will not leave it until I command it with this horn.” She blew a short burst on an ancient looking silver horn, the sound at once distant and plaintive, and the figures glided away from the platform. Wordless obedience at the sound of a heart breaking.

As they moved I saw an inert figure lying on the dais, and the shock was dulled by weariness and a sense of inevitability.

He lay, fully clothed, his hair fallen away from his face, his profile achingly familiar. I struggled to my feet again, knowing that if he was dead there was no reason for me to fight anymore, I felt as if the heart had been pulled right out of me, ripped away by the glossy talons of this evil woman who had claimed him for her own.

“I’m sure he called to you, somehow,” Caroline went on, which means that he feels he’s not yet ready for me. I tried to tell him, but he wouldn’t listen.”

“Ready for you?” My voice was becoming stronger, and I knew why; there was hope still. He was breathing, I could see his chest rising and falling, the edges of his jacket moving just slightly. It was enough.

“I told him I saw The Reaper. That wasn’t exactly true, but it did serve to show me that he believes in such things.”

“Oh yeah, he believes alright,” I told her bitterly. She must have known the best way to get at him was through his fascination with all things supernatural. “So you *didn't* see The Reaper?”

“Not strictly speaking.”

And as I tore my gaze away from the man I now knew I loved, I saw her face melt and change, dissolving where she stood, and horror kept my eyes fixed on that chilling and sickening sight. She seemed to grow – just a little, but it seemed as if she stretched herself upwards and outwards, and I felt my gorge rise.

As I stared on in revolted fascination I realised what was happening; her clothing became loose on her stick-thin frame, her eyes grew larger and larger until they became the wide, empty sockets I knew they'd be, and as the flesh melted and ran from her face it revealed the stark white bone beneath, the skeletal features of the feared Grim Reaper.

She held her scythe with fingers of the same bleached bone as her face and yet still I knew that she was truly female. “He's mine, you see...” she grated through her bony jaw, “he just doesn't accept it. But with you here, he will. When he sees you accompany me he'll let go.”

“Then go ahead!” I screamed suddenly. The pain at the thought of Alex dying had taken any desire to live and dashed it against the gnarled and twisted trees that surrounded me. I broke and ran for the raised platform, vaguely aware of the horn sounding again and the cowed figures parting as if it were part of a well-rehearsed play. I struggled to Alex's side, placing my hands on his face, feeling the skin cool and clammy beneath my fingers.

“Alex, don’t give her what she wants, come back to me, please!” I cried. He stirred, his brow creasing in sudden pain, and I turned to see The Reaper raising her scythe twisting it in front of her. I felt a brush of air on my hand and looking back, saw that Alex was trying to speak. He opened his mouth again, but fell limp a moment later. A laugh cut through the silence and with a scream of white-hot rage I flew at her, heedless of the instrument of death she wielded as she moved to meet me.

As I got halfway across the clearing I stopped dead.

Behind the hooded figure of the Reaper was a half-formed shape. Shocked, I turned to look back at the dais and he was still there, yet he had somehow projected the remainder of his living spirit as he had when he had come for me back in the forest. *When he had come for me!* A shaky laugh, a crazy sense of rightness built up in me then, and I let the laugh out. It had the effect of stopping The Reaper where she stood – she had no idea that Alex was able to do this, had only been guessing before, and the fact that he had found the strength in his dying body to come for *me* told me all I needed to know.

I laughed again. Caroline/Hecate/The Reaper faltered in her scythe swishing – she had evidently thought that my reason for stopping was down to my terror of her, but then, how could she think anything else? She had sent her minions to drag me into this underworld place, to sacrifice me so that Alex would follow, would gladly go with her. That meant she knew that he loved me as much as I loved him. A fact that had escaped me for the better part of nine years ...

“Oh, Caroline,” I said, my chest light with joy mingled with the residue of fear.

“How can I ever thank you?”

“What?” she hissed.

“I can die knowing that Alex loves me, and I would never have found out if it weren’t for you,” I told her, forcing a wide smile onto my frozen lips.

“Alex has gone, and he’s not gone with *you*. He needed to know I loved him. And thanks to you he knows that at last, and he can be at peace...”

“He isn’t dead!” she shrieked, flying past me to the deathly still body on the platform. I stepped towards the shadowy figure that had appeared behind her and reached out my hand. He caught at it with his own gossamer fingers and we pulled each other close, strength flowing from my heart to his in a brilliant white light. I felt him grow stronger in my arms, more solid, and as Caroline fell upon the body on the dais it faded, leaving her sprawled alone on the white stone, the cowed figures swarming around her and trapping her as was their duty.

As Alex gained strength he took his weight on his feet and, still swaying from the effect of whatever evil she had cast over him he put his hands on my shoulders.

“I never knew for sure,” he whispered, “I’m so sorry...”

We looked over at the screaming, furious figure on the dais, growing weaker by the minute as her own evil began working on her and the strangely silent, hooded figures performed their duty.

“She has good taste in men,” I acknowledged, and then burst into tears as Alex held me tight. After a while he took the silver horn and trampled it into the ground. We both watched as it was swallowed up in the steaming filth.

We walked, Alex and I, we walked all our lives it felt like and finally, when we could go no further we sank down and held each other again as we slept.

“Come on, you lazy git!” The voice came from right behind me, and I jerked awake, aware at once the cold feel of wet leather against my face. Alex sat upright and the feeling vanished, leaving a cool patch on my skin. I rubbed at it, confused and blinking in the sunlight.

“We know what you two were doing, sloping off alone last night!” grinned Dave. At his shoulder stood Sally, who looked less sure. What had happened after we’d vanished last night? Had Sally merely carried on up the hill, knowing I’d fallen, knowing I might have hurt myself? Or maybe it had just been some horrific nightmare? I glanced at Alex, he looked pale and thoughtful, and a little ill.

“What the hell did you do to your jeans?” Sally asked, surprise in her voice but not in her eyes. Denial, that’s what was in her eyes this morning – something had happened and she didn’t know what it was. And neither did she want to, thank you very much.

“I tore them in the hedge,” I told her levelly, and held her eyes with mine for just a second. She looked away first, her expression stricken and confused. Dave was the only one of us who seemed unaffected.

“So, you look a little ill, my man,” he told Alex. “Hangover is it? Too much to deal with last night, eh?”

Another look flashed between Alex and me. No nightmare, real. But we had each other now.

“Yeah, just a little too much,” he agreed. Dave snickered.

“Thought so, you look like death...”

The End

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