

Square One

by Sue Hitchcock

It was twenty years since their last row. Whether “last” meant final or most recent was hardly in doubt after so long. They had argued and fought many times in the years from their first meeting at university, but they had always been glad to reconcile, sometimes after years and once by accident, when they found themselves seated together on a coach from Tiverton to Hammersmith. All that was in the days before mobile phones.

The final row was indeed a matter of life and death, when Hedda asked Phoebe to be the executrix of her will, in which her not inconsiderable wealth would be left to an animal charity. Hedda’s daughter and grandson would receive nothing. Phoebe had previously tried to reconcile mother and drug-addicted daughter, to no avail and refused to become involved. It was the end of a long friendship. And yet...

For a while Phoebe had followed Hedda’s traces on Google, but after struggling with her own family problems, she couldn’t find her anymore.

Hedda had made a habit of moving house, wasting quite a lot of the inheritance from her father’s farm. Address after address drew a blank even on Rightmove. No sign remained of her movements, not even the sale of her most recent flat.

Phoebe began to explore Hedda’s daughter, Vilna and her grandson, Loki. Not a sign. How could someone of the younger generation be absent from the internet? A journey into reality would have to be made.

The journey began in a civilised way, with an afternoon train, half empty, to London Bridge followed by a tube ride to Hammersmith. The bus station had deteriorated from the time when Phoebe travelled to Tiverton to visit her mother, now strewn with litter and the seats occupied by shabby people seeking shelter. The coach also looked its age, but at least the seats were booked, not a free-for-all getting on. The cramped, smelly accommodation was hidden to her eyes as it grew dark. Was the destination going to be as she remembered? Tiverton bus station had no cover for shelter and the passengers vanished, collected by friends or grabbing every last taxi. Alone, Phoebe attempted to read the timetable by the light of her phone. Her destination was a mystery. She only knew it would be to the northwest, surely Hedda’s stone cottage was a possibility.

A vehicle drew up next to her and the driver opened the sliding side door.

“Are you a bus?”

“Could be, where do you want to go?”

Should she trust this strange, long-haired boy? Was he even old enough to drive?

“I think it is Lapford. Do you know it?”

“I might.”

“How much?”

“Whatever. I’ll see.”

Phoebe knew she shouldn’t, but she was old, had no accommodation arranged and threw caution to the wind. He offered a place next to him at the front.

“Sit here, we can talk.”

They set off into the dark night. Phoebe couldn’t identify the route, first main roads like every other, then country lanes, unlit except for headlights approaching. They stopped and reversed to a field gate where there was passing space. The young driver took the opportunity to roll up a cigarette or was it a spliff? The smoke drifted around and he began to sing, just gently, a haunting tune in an alien key. Phoebe was tired, her eyelids drooping.

It was light when Phoebe woke. She had slept so soundly, now wrapped in a crochet blanket of multi coloured squares joined by black edges. Outside there was no sign of her driver, but it was glorious, sun already warming her. She breathed a deep lungful of morning. The car was on a narrow country lane beside a steep valley in which an institutional building with rows of windows faced her. Surely it would flood in the rain. Phoebe opened the gate where a path sloped diagonally down to the front door. She slipped, but her elbow was caught by a smiling, middle aged man.

“This way! I don’t know how you found us.”

Phoebe looked back at the car, which was now pulling away and pointed to it feebly. “I didn’t even pay him.”

“Don’t worry about that. That’s only Loki. He knows all sorts of things.”

“I’m looking for a woman called Hedda.”

“Yes, he told me. Come this way.”

“Hedda’s room is on the first floor. I’d better tell her who you are, a relative maybe?”

“Just tell her ‘Phoebe.’”

He put his head around the door, saying her name. The reply came as an irascible scream, “Who...?”

Phoebe smirked as the door opened for her and stood waiting for the tirade. The small woman half-rolled out of her chair, then stood silhouetted against the window.

“You, you fucking cow. How did you find me?”

Phoebe realised she had one arm missing, “they had to amputate, then.”

“They bugged around with the blood vessels till it just died, so they took it off.”

Phoebe had succeeded in getting Hedda to talk on the phone with her daughter, while the doctors were planning a blood vessel transplant. Result – cut it off, cut her off!

“Make yourself useful, while you’re here. There’s paper and a pen on the table. Write

something for me.”

The table was cluttered with breakfast plates and a variety of cups and glasses. A piece of redundant toast caught Phoebe’s eye.

“Are you finished? Only I haven’t eaten since lunch yesterday.”

“waste not, want not, but hurry up or I’ll forget what I was going to say.” Hedda stood up and steered herself to the door with her one arm, surprisingly spritely in her footwork. She put her head out, “Ernst, bring us some tea, please.”

Phoebe stuffed down the toast and took up the pen, waiting for Hedda to dictate.

“Vilna, Is this your work? You’re wasting your time. I won’t change my mind, so bugger off.”

Phoebe waited, “is that it?”

“Yes. How did you get here? Oh, never mind. She’s sure to have something to do with it.”

“What do you mean. I came in a taxi, sort of.”

“That was no taxi. It was my grandson, Loki- he brought you.”

Phoebe had gone to look out of the window, when she was startled by Hedda’s commanding voice,

“Siri, call Loki!”

Of course, without her right arm, it made sense.

“What’s up, Gran?” came Loki’s laconic voice.

“Don’t call me that! You’re grown up now. Call me Hedda.”

“And...?”

“I want you to take this woman away, take her to Vilna and get her to take the hex off her.”

“What hex? I thought she was your friend.”

“Do it, please. Do it for your Gran!”

“O.k. anything for you.”

Hedda lay back in her chair and closed her eyes, breathing deeply.

Wondering what sort of woman she would find, Phoebe became anxious. “You know, the last time I saw Vilna, she was only sixteen. She came round with a lad in tow for the allowance you asked me to give her. They were proper Goths, all in black with pins and chains in their clothes, their ears, their noses, everywhere.”

“Stupid!”

“But they were so polite, so grateful for the spaghetti I cooked for them.”

“Beware! They’ll seduce you rather than attack you.”

“I came here to find you, not her. I didn’t expect the battle to still be ongoing.”

The door was slowly opening and a multi-coloured bobble-hat appeared almost covering the sleepy eyes of Loki.

Without a word, Loki took Phoebe’s hand and drew her out of the door and down the corridor to the stairs. Other residents were making their way down to the lounge, where coffee was being served, the delicious aroma filling Phoebe’s senses. “Would there be time for a cup?”

“Sure!” and he led her to a table by the window. “ I’ll order, I want a word with Ernst.”

Ernst was supervising the two waitresses, but greeted Loki, placing a hand on Loki’s

shoulder. Phoebe scrutinised the mainly elderly clientele. Like Hedda, they were lively, not at all in decline and well-dressed too. This was not a nursing home, as she had initially suspected. Loki returned with the flat white she had requested and hot chocolate for himself.

“Is this a hotel? It isn’t like an old people’s home.”

“Gran and Ernst bought it between them. They check out the guests are to their taste and, more importantly, can afford the fees. They don’t all stay long. If they get boring, they are encouraged to move.”

“So, did Hedda put all her money into it?”

“I don’t know for sure, maybe.”

“Perhaps Vilna knows. Still it’s not really my business.”

“Come on, she’ll be waiting for us.”

Phoebe recognised the old cottage, which looked smaller than she remembered

Flowers were almost hiding it, some witchy-looking ivy, but also pink and blue clematis and climbing roses. A hand-written notice declared ‘plants for sale’. The front path was almost obscured by pots and trays of sweet peas, marigolds waiting for space to flourish.

“wow!” Phoebe gasped, wanting to stop and browse, but Vilna was waiting at the door. Was this a witch? Ridiculous! Tall, with a plait over one shoulder, entwining blue, purple, green hair and braids, she was grinning, almost laughing.

“So you’ve been sent to be de- hexed! Come in.”

The dark room was like a film set, the huge open fireplace prepared for lighting with a log on the iron grate and fire irons, ready for use.

Phoebe laughed, “ Do you have a cauldron to hang over the fire, so you can throw in your frogs and newts, for a spell?”

“I do, actually, but being vegan, I only use plants. There’s some soup ready, if you’re hungry. Or there’s a tin of tomato soup, if you don’t trust me.”

“Well, I’d have some soup, if you’re having some.”

Vilna set out three, somewhat chipped bowls and ladled out the soup.

Loki joined them and they ate in silence “In reverence for the Earth’s gifts.” As Vilna requested.

“Thank you. Am I de-hexed now?”

“I feel you are more hexed now, if you are happy here.”

“When Hedda says you have hexed me, she means I am on your side. As I recall, the issue was entirely money.”

“Look, it’s easy to become a drug addict, but without money, everyone wants to control you. In some ways it was good I was in prison. – you knew I was in prison?”

“Yes.”

“Methadone isn’t much fun and you’re never free from inspection, but you can play the game and find a private space. It was always the war between Hedda and me which was our life. At least the Social workers helped me get Loki back. He was five and couldn’t even remember me. He used to cry for his Gran.”

“Was that when we spoke, when Hedda was in hospital?”

“She wouldn’t speak to me then, after the family court said she couldn’t see Loki any more.”

Phoebe was shaking her head at the memory. "It ended my friendship with her too. The reason I came here was to resolve my loss- she was my best friend, you know."

"I refuse to talk to her, because she always starts a fight. Loki is the go-between."

"May I see your garden?"

"Of course, but I'll let Loki take you round. I have a client coming for a consultation in a minute. O.K. Loki?"

He seemed to have nodded off, but lifted his head, smiling.

Phoebe remembered how the garden was, a lawn surrounded by hydrangeas and roses, climbing over a pergola which led to the barn, Hedda had converted into a delightful little residence. She claimed to have installed the shower room and tiled it herself. Now the paradise garden was darker, shaded by an elder tree and shrubs of a poisonous nature. Surely that was belladonna, and the flowers offered other medical possibilities. Purple irises stood tall in front of foxgloves and then came a bed of umbellifers, fennel and angelica disguising the dangerous hogweed with its crimson, mottled stem.

Phoebe shuddered. It was here that Hedda had made one of her most biting insults, dismissing Phoebe's efforts with, "You're no gardener, anyway." How was it that people were still drawn to such a spiteful woman?

"Loki, do you live in the barn?"

"We both do. The cottage is just for show. Vilna is famous hereabouts. Let me show you the greenhouse. It's my project, to grow my pot, but we hide it behind tomatoes and things."

"Should you be telling me?"

"You're Hedda's friend, aren't you?"

"I am, but it's the drugs which made her decide not to leave you anything in her will."

"Don't you worry about that. We don't. Oh, talk of the devil!" Loki's phone was ringing,

"Hello, Gran.....yes,...what time?...o.k."

"She says Ernst is making a special dinner for you tonight. I'm to bring you back at seven."

"Oh, am I welcome now? Am I de- hexed?"

"Could be."

"May I see the barn? When my husband and I stayed here twenty years ago, it still had a corrugated iron roof. One day a rumbling noise made us look out upstairs and there was a herd of cows treading down all the wheat. We ran out and tried to shoo them away, but they all came over, curious and friendly."

"Cows are funny."

"Hedda wasn't phased. She just phoned the farmer owner of the cows, who should have kept his fences in better repair."

"Things happen"

Loki opened the door, which wasn't locked, "This is it."

Although small, it was simple and plain, in the modern way, but had a few Shaker elements, like spare chairs hung from hooks on the wall. There were two painting, portraits of dogs, recognisably Hedda's work.

"You don't object to Hedda's painting?"

"Those were my lovely dogs. She painted them for me when I wasn't allowed to see her any more. I'll never part with them."

"I understand, but you don't have any of her sculpture?"

“Mum put them outside. You might find them under the bushes.”

“Let me look round the garden till it’s time to go.”

“Change of heart, eh?” When she arrived, Phoebe was astounded to find Hedda at the top of the difficult front path, waving and smiling like a long-lost relative. How she got there was a mystery, unless she had climbed like a three-legged dog. Then Ernst emerged and gathered her up by the waist, tucking her under his arm, which made her laugh more.

When they had retrieved their dignity in the front hall, Hedda finally introduced them properly.

“Phoebe, meet Ernst, my partner in crime, or at least in this establishment. Ernst, meet Phoebe, my oldest – sorry but it’s true – my oldest friend.”

Phoebe was torn between annoyance at being called old and relief at now being the friend again. Anyway, Hedda was two months older than her.

“Ernst is preparing a special dinner for the three of us, in my room.”

The flaps had been put up on the table and a lace-edged cloth laid, on which three plates of starters had been set ready. Each plate had a circle of small lettuce leaves, looking like a flower. Inside each leaf protected a small delight – an amuse bouche, as the French would say. First Ernst had to open a bottle of champagne, with the flourish of a maître de hotel.

Hedda giggled stupidly as the cork popped and Phoebe, mystified, worried about the volte face. What on earth was it all about?

The reality of eating silenced everyone. The lettuce disclosed prawns, olives, scallops, mouthfuls of pate, walnuts on cream cheese and mushrooms cooked in garlic butter. The bubbly savoured the food and softened the mood, till thought of a second course was forgotten.

“So how did you find him, the wonderful Ernst?”

“I didn’t. He found me!”

“It’s true! I was looking for her.” Ernst launched into a well-rehearsed speech, he must have repeated word for word hundreds of times, “It was when my father died, more than fifteen years ago that I started researching his past. He had always told us he had been a prisoner of war, sent to a farm in Devon. I thought he might really have been a Nazi, but after a lot of searching, I found it was true. So I came for a holiday to see if I could find the farm, Maidenford farm.”

“Oh yes, your parents sold it just after we met, Hedda. My parents did the same. We were both a bit lost, I think.”

“Anyway, I found Hedda’s mother’s funeral notice in the newspaper archive, with mention of Maidenford farm. Hedda here was quite a character, well known, and finally we met.”

A silly smile passed between them but Phoebe’s hesitation provoked Ernst to go and fetch the second course.

“I remember you saying a German prisoner worked at your farm. He seems to have been very kind to you, but you were only three at the end of the war. I’m surprised you had any memory of him.”

“Maybe my mother told me most of it.”

“She must have liked him, she was never that sociable. I remember her doing the Telegraph crossword at mealtimes, rather than chat.”

“True.”

Ernst returned with Wiener Schnitzel, which they ate accompanied with a Hock from the Moselle, and finished with a Linzer Torte.

Phoebe couldn't help wondering why a German would choose such an Austrian menu.

“Where do you come from, Ernst?”

“Well, near Munich, just a small village. I inherited a bakery from my father, where I learned to cook, and that was my life till I retired. I would be there still if I hadn't come to Devon for a holiday and found Hedda.”

“Oh,” yawned Phoebe, “I am so tired, well fed and a bit drunk. Where can I sleep?”

“There's a room down the corridor. Show her where, please, Ernst.”

Phoebe tapped gently on Hedda's door. The uncharacteristic jollity of the night before was disturbing. Would Ernst be there in bed with her? Might she be hungover, or still in a happy mood?

“What?” Came a loud shout.

Phoebe felt glad, reassured. Hedda was her usual self, it would seem.

“How do you feel this morning?”

“You tell me. Did Ernst sleep with you last night?”

“No, of course not. I'm not interested any more, must have used up too much libido, when I was young. You still do, then?”

“I was waiting for him to come back, fell asleep with my make-up on. Still, at least he didn't come on to you.”

“Headache?”

“No, just getting old, like you. Anyway, what do you do to amuse yourself? Do you still sing?”

“No voice now. Just read and listen to music.”

“That's a bit pathetic.”

“Well, there's family and lots of wildlife to watch. I still grow stuff.”

“Hmm.”

“I suppose this place – what is it? A hotel, a nursing home? – I suppose it keeps you busy.”

“It keeps Ernst busy, but I do what I can, mainly make decisions. We are business partners, for the most part.”

“With benefits? So who inherits the business when you die?”

“I'm not ready to kick the bucket yet. At present my will leaves this place to Ernst. He argued Vilna and Loki should get the cottage and the barn, as I already let them live there free of charge. They just pay the rates.”

“So a change of heart?”

“Vilna still fights me, but she can't have drug money from me. She is all lovey-dovey one day, then all of a sudden she's screaming at me again. Family trait, I suppose.”

“Do you want to go out? We could go for a drink before lunch.”

“Now you're talking.”

Watching Hedda get ready to go out was a surprise. She was always inventive, but the jacket with a stuffed sleeve made life easier. There was even a hand made of a fine leather glove protruding from the cuff.

“See, now I only have to do the buttons and my left hand is clever enough for that.”

“Didn’t they give you a prosthetic arm?”

“Oh, yeah, bloody nuisance! I got angry with it and stamped on it. I couldn’t put it on without help. It had fixings round my chest and on the shoulder, stupid!”

Hedda called Loki to fetch them and they headed for the road, Phoebe functioning as Hedda’s right hand support.

“Where to, Gran?”

“We’re going for a drink. Where’s good?”

“I’ve got someone to see in Barnstable. You fancy that?”

“Home ground?” Phoebe enquired, Hedda’s ex had family there still.

“Why not?”

The sea was just visible at the end of the High Street as they entered the Red Lion, but they weren’t tourists, even Phoebe lived near the coast. It was dark inside, but Loki led them to his favourite spot, where several elderly fixtures were chatting in heavy Devon accents.

“How be, Loki? Ladies with you today. We’d better mind our language.”

“You know my Gran, Hedda, and this is her old friend, Phoebe.”

“Oh, Hedda, of course! Looking well!”

Hedda frowned, “sorry, who are you?”

“I’m Tony Russell, my parents had the farm next to you, next to Maidenford.”

“Did you know me?”

“You were a sweet little thing, going off in you school uniform.”

“That was a long time ago.”

Loki was offering to buy pints for Tony and his two mates, so the women agreed to halves of the same, finding themselves left in the unexpected conversation. They tried speaking to each other but were interrupted further by Tony.

“You’ve got that German chap running your place, I hear.”

Hedda sighed. “So?”

“Claims to be the son of the prisoner of war, who was on your farm.”

“Yes.” Too much, Hedda turned away.

Tony persisted, “It was Loki, that found him, I remember it well. He told him all about Hedda’s story of having a prisoner of war at the farm. Actually there were a few of them round here, so maybe his dad was..”

“Bored!” Hedda didn’t want any more. “Let’s go! Are you ready, Loki?”

He was dreaming, as usual, “Home again, Gran?”

“If you’re ready.”

Back home Phoebe whispered to Loki, “Please wait!” as they were helping Hedda out of the car and down the steep path.

“Stop fussing, will you. I can manage.” And she started up the stairs unaided.

“Where to, missus?”

“Do call me Phoebe!”

“Okay, missus.”

“To your place. I want to talk to you and Vilna.”

“Okay.”

Loki never questioned what he was asked to do, and hardly considered the future. He just provided what people asked for and made sure he got paid. These rides Hedda’s friend was taking would all be paid for by Hedda, via Ernst. His Gran was still wary about funding his or Vilna’s drug habit, but Ernst smoothed the way.

Loki led Phoebe to the barn, round one side of the cottage.

“Isn’t she in the cottage?”

“Nah..I expect she’s asleep.”

It was late afternoon, so she puzzled.

“Make yourself at home. I’ll get her.”

Vilna was rumped and her eyes barely open as she swayed and steadied herself on the door frame.

“Hello. You should have warned me you were coming.” Flopping into an armchair. “make some coffee, Loki.” Then to Phoebe, “Give me a few minutes.”

“Are you still using?”

But Vilna seemed to be asleep again.

Loki arrived with three mugs of coffee and nudged his mother.

“Maybe I should try what she’s using. I never sleep well.”

“just ask.”

After coffee Vilna roused, and an hour had passed, waiting.

“What’s your problem. Are you going to rat me out to her?”

“What would be the point?”

“What then?”

“On her own, I know her, but with Ernst she seems silly. Does she think she’s in love at her age? Is she going senile?”

“She’s always wanted to have someone in love with her. You remember that Moroccan guy she used to meet when she holidayed there?”

“oh, yes.”

“Well he came over and they got married. He scarpered a couple of weeks later. She was unbearable, seething with rage. She is delusional.”

Loki had been considering this, “I thought Ernst could make her happy.”

Phoebe and Vilna looked at Loki aghast.

“It wasn’t your idea, was it? What did you do?”

“The old guys in the pub were talking about the war, what their dads did and then it came up that a few people had prisoners of war on their farms to help. Well I was feeling a bit left out, so I told them about great grandad and the German who was at Maidenford farm – gran had told me about him several times.”

“Was Ernst there?”

“He must have been.”

“He didn’t talk to me till a couple of weeks later.”

“And?”

“Well he said he was looking for a lady, called Hedda, who used to live at Maidenford farm when she was a child.”

“Didn’t you think it was a bit of a coincidence?”

“I didn’t think. He was buying the drinks.”

“What have you done?”

“He’s been good for us, getting her to change her Will to give us this place.”

“But what else has he got her to change, the bastard?”

They sat, all three, gloomily contemplating the fraud they had fallen for.

Suddenly Vilna alerted, “It’s all your fault, you know!”

Under attack, Phoebe stiffened, “Me? What did I do?”

“She loved to make you laugh, getting more and more outrageous.”

“But I wasn’t there much of the time.”

“No, but you were her best friend, so she always wondered what you would think.”

“Surely she cared more about you.”

“You’d think.” Vilna whinged, “I left home because she was ignoring me, and who did she ask to check on me but you? From then on it was my outrageous behaviour which connected her to you.”

“We were close at that time. You were alternately totally drugged up, then next full of repentance. Weren’t you manipulating her?”

“I needed her, but there was always you.”

“And there was I trying to look after my own daughters.”

“Then I went to prison – I don’t blame you for that – and she had my little Loki for three years.”

“Both of you were broken hearted.”

Vilna was now weeping. Loki had never seen his mother cry and knelt in front of her, burying his face in her lap.

It was nearly dark by the time they had recovered from the revelations they had heard, when Vilna rose to find a bottle of vodka and three glasses. “Enough of the past. Have a drink and tomorrow we’ll decide what to do.”

Phoebe had avoided Hedda that night, needing to think how to broach the subject of Ernst’s identity, without being thrown out. Hedda could be incensed by such a challenge.

“Where did you get to yesterday?”

“I went to see Vilna again. On my first visit she put on a fantastic performance – the Green Witch, benevolent, butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth.”

“Huh, typical. So what did you find out yesterday?”

“Well, it was more what Loki said.”

“You can’t trust what he says. Sometimes he thinks his dreams are real.”

“Listen! This is serious and you’re not going to like this.”

“Tell me the worst.”

“He said that he was talking about what you had told him, about the German prisoner of war on your farm.”

“No-one would take any notice of that. Other farmers had them too.”

“That’s why he wanted to join in with the old boys, with their memories.”

“No harm in that.”

“But, but somebody was listening.”

“Ernst, of course.”

“Apparently.”

“Maybe he saw it as an opportunity.”

Hedda got up to stand and stare out of the window. “Go away, please.”

Phoebe had never lied to her. She was not even bothered by Hedda’s provocation or nasty digs. She would just laugh or at worst not speak to her for a day or two. Only that last disagreement on denying Vilna any inheritance had separated them, and even now, she had come back after twenty years.

Hedda had never been very curious about the men in her life, and her spiky character had always driven them away. Ernst had been her last hope and he indulged her every whim. Was it so unlikely that he was otherwise motivated? She felt cold and somewhat shaky.

Ernst was repulsed at lunchtime. He would have to get that Phoebe to leave. She was undermining his plan. Was she jealous or did she know something?

Loki seemed to be avoiding him, “Heh, Loki, what are you up to?”

“Just getting my gran.”

“Going somewhere?”

“Maybe, I don’t know. Could be.”

Ernst stood, arms folded, but Hedda did not emerge. Only when he had gone did Loki lead Hedda and Phoebe down the back stairs to the garden.

Vilna had an umbrella, “it’s too wet, we’d better talk in the car.”

“This is a bit cloak and dagger, isn’t it?”

There was an elderly man in the car.

“Andrew?”

“Hello, Hedda. I haven’t seen you for years. How are you?”

“well enough, what’s left of me. And you?”

“Creaky.”

“Why are you here?”

“Vilna fetched me, though why I should help you, I’ve no idea.”

“How did she find you?”

“We met at Dave’s funeral. You didn’t come.”

“We hated each other, so why would I?”

“Uncle Andrew used to know Ernst.”

“It was a while ago. I thought I recognised him hanging around in the pub. I thought his name was ‘Janos’, but though he turned when I said it, he said no, he was Ernst.

“Why are you so sure?”

“Well, it was when I was working on that new estate -electrician I used to be. He was just labouring, but he was handy and you could ask him to fetch things. Very obliging. Then one day he was gone, along with a van full of tools- not mine fortunately.”

“Didn’t the police go after him?”

“I imagine he went straight to the ferry, Portsmouth, maybe, and went back to wherever he came from, to start a business.”

“What if you’re wrong?”

“Perhaps you should ask him. Look, I’ve told you what I know and it’s not my business, so I wish you luck and goodbye.” Andrew had more than enough of his brother’s ex and escaped back to his own car hastily.

“Now what?”

Phoebe sat with the family, listening to plots and plans, while the rain streamed down the windscreen, turning the view into a green watercolour, but a plots were arranged.

Having given the kitchen staff full instructions, Ernst was ready for the planned picnic on Dartmoor. He had baked some traditional pasties and some of a vegan version too. Vilna had brought home-grown tomatoes from the greenhouse, some muffins flavoured with berries and some scrumpy cider a client had given as part of her payment. Loki had a full pouch of cannabis, Phoebe promised to pay for the petrol and Hedda had her father’s shotgun. “My dad used to shoot rabbits for a pie, but he mainly used it to frighten away crows. He used to have a rhyme-‘Blackbird, blackbird, in yon wurzel field, I’ll ‘ave ‘ee for supper, I’ll ‘ave ‘ee for tea.”

“You didn’t really eat crows, did you?”

“Hmm...maybe.”

Loki took his usual place at the wheel, but Vilna, outside said, “Why don’t I drive, I know the way?” There was some shuffling around ending with Ernst at the front next to Vilna and at the back Hedda to the left, so that her one arm could hold on. Loki sat next to her to fasten her seat belt and obey her commands, leaving Phoebe looking at the tattoos on the nape of Vilna’s neck. All ready? Go!

The winding journey through grey villages, not yet colonised by city owners turning cottages into ornamental second homes, ended at last at a car park on the edge of the moor. The footpath led up to a ridge from where a view was far-reaching over the lumpy, hilly moor, strewn with rocks and tussocks of heather and bilberries.

“I remember the way to the source of the river Dart. Follow me!” but Hedda struggled. “Give me the shotgun! I can use it as a walking stick.” It seemed like a good idea, but with only one arm, it was troublesome. Ernst came to the rescue, with an arm around her waist on the side where hers was missing. The shotgun was thrust at Phoebe, who trailed behind with it slung over her shoulder. Both Vilna and Loki were laden with food.

Once the path dwindled there was stumbling and tripping, but finally the stream appeared and they followed it uphill till there was the merest dribble and the rock from which it emerged.

There was jubilation and the burdens were dropped, including the careful settling of Hedda on a rug in prime position.

The Winchester family were somewhat confused. They had all made their plans, but who

would do the deed was uncertain.

Phoebe and Ernst were just looking forward to the picnic and had found a rock for a table and were opening the packages. It seemed remarkable to Phoebe that Hedda and Vilna were in such intense discussion, not hostile and Loki listening, but not playing go-between.

The pasties and cider went down well, a perfect Devon picnic. Phoebe reached over for a muffin, but Vilna turned the plate around, so that she took one with a gooseberry on top, rather than the blackcurrant. Ernst was offered one too, from the other side, which made her nervous. What was Vilna up to?

They lay back in the sunshine, Phoebe asleep. Ernst leaping up woke her, "I feel sick!" he moaned and staggered down the hill, over the stream. Loki followed to help.

Vilna hmmd.

Hedda, puzzled, "What?"

Phoebe's suspicions about the muffin coalesced.

Loki sat Ernst down and attempted to clean him up. Then made a roll-up which always made him feel better and shared it.

"Leave them. Let's look for rabbits." Hedda had pulled a couple of cartridges from her pocket and loaded the shotgun, with the barrel held between her feet.

"Phoebe, help me up onto that ledge, so we can see better."

The old ladies slowly achieved the viewpoint and began the search, but Phoebe was too short-sighted. Hedda lifted the gun, "I can see them over there, but I can't reach the trigger. You'll have to help me. Let me use your shoulder. If you face me, you can see when I'm going to shoot. Lean your head away, or it'll deafen you."

Phoebe was uncomfortable, but waited patiently. Then boom!

She had fallen, stunned, deafened, heart beating like an express train. When she opened her eyes a police woman was talking, silently to her.

When sound came through, she was being asked, "Did you know the man, Ernst Wolf?"

Phoebe was waiting outside the police station. At last Hedda emerged helped down the steps by a police woman.

"I sat in a room the colour of egg yolk for two hours, while the officer got my story down."

"We've been waiting, but they only detained me briefly after examining the powder burns on my shoulder. Loki came out ten minutes ago and he's waiting for us."

"What about Vilna?"

"You'd better ask."

Hedda disappeared back into the station.

"They're holding her for a bit. With her record I'm not surprised."

"But she wasn't anywhere near it!"

"Most of their questions were about Ernst, so I told them how it was before I found out he wasn't who he claimed to be, as if nothing had changed."

"Do you feel alright?"

"That yellow colour was giving me a migraine. At first I felt sick, but a medic came and checked me out, checked my missing arm, as well. At least that got you out of trouble."

"Do they know if Ernst is dead?"

“Of course he isn’t. Who ever heard of anyone being killed with a shotgun. No, he’s just peppered. They’re digging the pellets out in A&E.”

“Let’s find out what Loki told them.”

Hedda gave him a shake as his eyes were shut, dozing.

“Gran, you frightened me! I wasn’t asleep. They let me go, because I said he was my friend, but then I got confused with all the questions about how I met him. They kept asking me if I knew different people, one called Janos, mostly. I think they gave up in the end because I was mystified.”

As Loki negotiated the car park a shout came from the building, “Wait, wait!” Vilna was out, at last. She scrambled into the front seat next to her son.

“What did you tell them?”

“I’ve only met the man three or four times. All I could say was that he had persuaded you to let us have the cottage and the barn.”

“And I could always change my mind.” threatened Hedda.

Vilna started to mumble curses under her breath, but Loki hid nothing, “You wouldn’t, would you Gran?”

“Just be good, that’s all.”

It was days before they found out what the outcome was. Phoebe and Hedda should have been charged with something. You can’t go shooting someone, even by accident. Both women were elderly and would have been let off with a warning, or at worst with a suspended sentence. Given that Ernst Wolf was not who he claimed to be, and was being investigated by Interpol. It seemed simpler to hand him over and avoid the paperwork.

At Hedda’s hotel cum nursing home Ernst was missed, not only by Hedda, but also the guests, who were threatening to stop paying. The family and Phoebe pulled together and provided the promised services as best they could. Phoebe seemed to think washing dishes was her role. She didn’t mind, though Vilna hated it, Loki dropped things and Hedda – well she only had the one hand. So Loki lugged boxes of vegetables about, Vilna chopped and prepped, leaving Hedda to stir. The waitresses kept up appearances, serving dishes and clearing tables. All was well until Hedda tried to open the door to the laundry.

“Who’s doing the fucking laundry. I can’t get in, though it pongs, so I’m not going to try!”

“I suppose you think I should do it.” Vilna complained, “Am I even getting paid?”

“You’ll do whatever you want, won’t you. You always do.”

“You ungrateful cow. Get some skivvies and pay them!”

“Go, and take Loki with you. I can smell cannabis all over the house.”

There was a general upheaval as daughter and grandson collected their things and made a hasty departure. Hedda had forgotten Phoebe, who was shaking her head in despair, still up to her elbows in greasy water.

“Come on, you. I’ve called a proper taxi. We’re going into town to hire some regular staff, then we’re going to get drunk.”

“God, we’re back to square one!” Phoebe thought drying her hands on a tea cloth.