

# Solsticetide

## A Modern Order of Guardians Short Story

by

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Max Crabbe woke and was immediately sick. Head pounding, stomach heaving, the light from the street lamps through the curtains was like a knife to the temple. It seemed as if the whole world were out of kilter, the air around him misaligned.

He paused to allow the world to stop sliding away from him and settle, but it didn't. He heaved again and something anxious started fluttering in his chest, urgently nagging for his attention. The old, familiar tug on his mind told him to get to his feet, to find some kind of help.

The Solsticetide had arrived with a vengeance; it was never pleasant but it wasn't usually this bad.

The door of his childhood bedroom opened and, thankfully, his father appeared.

“Maxy?” his Da flicked on the light and Max nearly screamed in pain, “Is it bad, Lad?”

Max's mother had decreed – when she'd finally agreed to her youngest child leaving home – that he would have to come home for every solstice, equinox or planetary alignment so that someone would be on hand in case “the worst” happened. Max hadn't been entirely certain what his mother considered to be “the worst”, but he was beginning to think that this might be it. If someone had handed him a drill at that moment he would cheerfully have set it to his temple just to relieve the pressure that was building in his skull.

“At least until you find a nice girl,” his mother had said. He'd already found one once. He didn't think he'd find another.

Now, Max was grateful for his Da's presence. Da Crabbe had told him tales of sitting up late at night with GranDa Crabbe – Old Josiah – waiting out the shifting tides of time and space, waiting for the Stones to fall silent again. Everyone in the Order had been surprised when the link had passed from Old Josiah directly to his youngest grandson. Everyone, that is, except Tom Crabbe.

And Milly Grey.

Max tried to answer his Da and instead was more ill than he'd ever been in his life.

"Right then," Tom Crabbe declared and swiftly took charge. Over the next half an hour the Crabbe family was marshalled into an extreme variation of its customary solstice-tide routine. When Max returned to some semblance of consciousness his brother Andro – "It's different!" his mother had declared at the time – was sat on the end of his bed nursing a mug of what smelled like coffee, his long legs stretched out in front of him as he listened to their Da pacing the hallway, talking into 'The Mobile'.

"Honestly Lizzie," Max could hear him talking low outside the bedroom, "it's the worst I've ever seen him. Worse than my Da. They're sure there's nothing happening?"

There was the incomprehensible sound of someone answering – that would be Doctor Lizzie Flett – and Max closed his eyes again, summoning the strength – and a little courage – to move.

"I think we need to stay alert. Double the watch the next few nights. It could be a ripple. Might manifest days from now. It could be an echo from something else-when, but it's never this bad Lizzie, never."

More mumbling.

Slowly, Max sat up and found that the world was a good deal more solid than before.

"Da," Andro said urgently and Max heard footsteps. He opened his eyes. Andro was holding out a mug of black coffee that stank of sugar and Max gratefully accepted it. Andro lifted his own mug in a salute and watched as Max sipped gingerly, and then gulped. Warmth and energy flooded through his veins and made him a little giddy. Miraculously, all evidence of the episode had vanished. The usual embarrassment washed over him as he realised he was wearing a different t-shirt and the bedding was fresh. Andro nudged him with a knee, reading his thoughts as he so often did. It hadn't been Mother.

Tom appeared in the doorway and watched Max drink as he continued to speak into The Mobile, "Could be. Either way we're in uncharted waters. Keep me posted... Aye, we will."

Tom ended the call with an emphatic stab at the mobile's screen and shoved

the thing in his pocket, “Lizzie’s at the Ring. Joshua and Cora say nothing’s happened.” He looked at Max thoughtfully, “Was it like the time with Milly?”

Max suppressed a shudder; nothing would ever be like the time with Milly.

“No,” Max replied hoarsely, “This is... The Stones aren’t calling, they’re... protesting. Wailing. Something’s out of whack. Like the off-key notes Milly used to talk about. I’d never understood, but this feels like that. Something is badly out of shape and it’s pushing everything out of alignment.”

“Maybe I should go up there too,” Andro set down his mug on Max’s desk, but Tom waved him back to his seat, “No, no. Your place is with your brother. You’re his Minder,” Tom paused, obviously struck by a stray thought, “Did you See anything?”

Andro considered and then shrugged, shaking his head, “Nothing other than what’s happened here tonight. But I’m not as powerful as Max.”

“No one else has called Lizzie. Not even the Seers from Brodgar or Avebury. The Watch hasn’t Seen or heard anything. They’d have noticed someone coming through.”

“They don’t always,” Andro pointed out and the Crabbes all fell silent, each remembering their own encounters with Travellers through Beacran’s Ring.

Downstairs the washing machine ramped up to the spin phase of its cycle, the low rumble and whine of the ancient machine filling the yawning silence that had engulfed the three men. Max let it drown out the memories that threatened to rear their ugly heads. The singing, singing, singing filling the glade around the Ring. The Stones summoning them all. Milly fading from view...

Andro’s hand landed on his knee and Max snapped back into himself, a dark cold sliding into his gut as he remembered where he was.

“We need to know what’s going on. Whatever it is we need to stop it, if only for your sake. We’ve four or five more nights of this and you’ll be laid out cold. We’ll none of us sleep now. Come on.”

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Max folded his arms over his chest and hunched himself in his jacket, trying to tuck his nose into the upturned collar, out of the howling gale. He couldn’t hold

on to any kind of warmth now; the coffee had long since faded from his veins. If his hair wasn't in his eyes it was trying to take flight.

Tom and Andro stood a few yards further along the wharf, feet planted wide apart, both struggling with what looked like a cobbled together collection of poles, ropes, wires and a sorry-looking twisted weather vane. They were setting up at the end of the stone wharf, along the course of the weakest of the three ley lines that intersected at the site of Beacran's Ring. They had tried to set up closer to the land, but it had quickly become clear that Max would not be able to withstand being that close to the Ring just now. The wharf's gentle curve out to sea had been the best compromise.

"Try that," Tom shouted as the wind gusted at them. Max ducked under one of the intertwined rope and wire connectors that linked the seven poles and took up his place in the centre. Andro hefted up an eighth pole, connected like the others, but tipped with the battered looking weather vane of a cockerel – complete with bullet-hole eye slit – and they all watched it spin wildly in the wind and then point its beak unerringly towards the wooded hill above the town of Bickering on Sea; towards Beacran's Ring – and perpendicular to the wind.

"Alright," Tom shouted again, "Try to access the Link. Ask them what's happening."

Max faced the direction of the Stones and, his back tucked into the wind, tried to relax into the Link as he had done a thousand times before. Eyes closed, he tried to sink down into the deep waters of the current that constantly passed through him. His consciousness touched the cold surface, skimmed along it and then plunged in, like diving into the sea around them.

The surface had been calm. The depths were churning like a riptide. Tumbled over and over, Max fought to find a kind of gravity, an anchor point. There was only the roiling tide pouring out from the Stones.

Gritting his teeth, Max tried to press in deeper. He had a direction now, a flow to fight against, and he fought. There was a kind of light in the depths – a burning, flickering, shadow light that faded in and out, like something coming through the Stones in another time. He would often catch echoes of other events if he stood in the centre of the Stones, or lingered near the Doorways between them. Ghostlight shows of age-old events would play out before him, but they were as far from his Present as Creation was from Armageddon.

This was different. It was a blazing shadow of...of... something. Max

reached with his hands, a physical manifestation of the action within his mind. It was like fighting the wash of a larger boat when he had gone out on the family's fishing trawler round the coast. Wave after wave of displaced time and events flooded past and around him, but at last he felt he had found a solid place in the flow.

Max spread his stance and took a few deep breaths, like a swimmer. He could get no closer, no deeper into the Link than this; he had a sense that the Stones were holding him off, trying to protect him from what they were enduring.

Max breathed deep again and reached for the Major Blue Stone – the keystone in the Ring. Even from this distance he could feel its anger and confusion at the misuse being inflicted upon it. It was shuddering in the earth. Not since Beacran had such indignities been inflicted on the Ring.

“What’s wrong?” Max shouted.

Da looked at Andro, but both waited for Max to return to them, battling the wind to maintain the circle of poles.

The key stone screamed – like granite rolling over marble down a cliff face – and Max Saw it.

Something or someone was trying to come through - but the only way the Stone could communicate it was “Sideways.” It was too big. Whatever it was wasn't going to fit through the Stones in the conventional way. Someone – some lunatic – was overriding all of the Order's rules about Travel, and trying to come through on their own terms.

This wasn't just trying to open an unsanctioned doorway, this was attempting to open every door in the Ring at the same, across every point in the course of the Ring's history and future. There were reasons why only one door was opened at time. There were reasons why some of the Stones had been removed – some doors had to be permanently closed for everyone's safety. Those doors shouldn't exist anymore, any-when, but someone was opening them anyway.

This was going against everything the Order stood for and was pledged to defend against. It was an all-out assault on the Ring - possibly even the world! – and the rest of the Order couldn't See a thing.

Max opened his eyes. There was nothing but the wind, the wharf and dear

old Bickering on Sea.

“What is it?!” Andro shouted over the rising wind as Max ducked back under the ropes and sprinted past him.

“The end of the bloody world!” Max yelled back, “Da! Call Lizzie! Andro! Come on!”

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Max leapt out of the car before it had even stopped moving. He was out, up and running through the trees before Andro had applied the parking brake, stumbling up the slope of the Mound between the trunks.

“Bloody idiot,” Andro muttered under his breath, “How am I supposed to protect you if you run off without me?”

Turning off the engine, he leaned between the seats of his Fiesta and snatched at the pile of objects beneath the blanket that lay over the back seat. The familiar etched surface of an ebony sheath came to hand and he hauled it out, followed by a compact crossbow, and the yawning mouth of a blunderbuss. With practised ease, Andro stashed them about his person in their customary holsters and fixings, locked the car and set off after his brother.

Andro unsheathed the sword as he ran, light-footed, knowing from experience that that was likely to be the most useful in the Ring itself.

Breaking through the treeline he saw his brother, already amongst the Stones, the members of the Watch crowding round him, asking questions. Lizzie spotted Andro and headed straight for him.

“Do you know what the Hell is going on?” she shouted over the wind, “I thought he couldn’t get near this place? Your Da said-.”

“I think we have to accept that things are in flux right now,” Andro waggled the sword at her, “Y’know. Maybe you could all get out of my way and let me do my job?”

Lizzie looked at him, holding back her long hair from her face, registered the presence of the sword, and opened her mouth to an ‘O’. She stepped back and nodded, “Right oh,” She turned to other crowding Max and shouted, “Watch! Stand down! Get back to the treeline.”

“Thank you,” Andro offered her what he had left of a smile, and stalked past her into the Ring, gripping the sword at guard before him. “Bloody

Chroniclers,” he muttered to himself.

Moving slowly and cautiously, Andro approached his brother, “You know it makes it really hard for me to protect you if you won’t wait for me,” Andro snapped at his brother as he came within earshot.

Max momentarily dragged his attention away from the Major Blue Stone he was standing before, and then back again, ignoring the rebuke. He no longer seemed to notice the wind thrashing the trees around them. Andro had had to drive his brother at high speed through the waves of sickness and nausea just to get him here. Max had nearly heaved into the footwell until Andro had shoved his head out of the window in time for it to hit the verge instead. Now there was no sign of the malady. They must be in the eye of the storm.

“Is she here?” Andro asked, taking up a defensive stance, covering his brother’s exposed back.

“No,” the desolation in Max’s voice told Andro all he needed to know about that. Milly was not going to be of any help to them, wherever – whenever – she was.

“Well, what do we do now?”

“I need to relieve the pressure. I’m going to open a door on this side.”

“Will that be enough?” Andro shouted over his shoulder, wondering if he should call in reinforcements.

“If it isn’t, I’ll have to open them all.”

“All at the same time? Is that even possible?”

“It’s what they’re trying to do on the other side,” even as Max spoke Andro could feel a tremor forming beneath his feet, “I have to interrupt the connection in our Present, try to knock them off course. If they Arrive there’s no telling what might happen.”

“Our Present?” Andro felt his blood run cold, “You don’t mean-“

“I can explain it to you or I can prevent the end of the world. Which do you want-?”

“Get on with it, you arse!”

“You’re with me?”

“Yes! I’ve got you covered.”



Max went silent on him, and Andro steadied himself. He'd been willing his foresight to show him something, anything, but if Max was right and all of the doorways of the stone circle were being opened at the same time at every moment along its timeline then his vision would be disrupted. He would have to protect his brother without the advantage of knowing what their attacker was going to do before they actually did it. He would have to do this old school.

The wind whipped faster round the circle and Andro could feel it start to twist and arc, rushing around its confines. The ground continued to rumble and he widened his stance, leaning forward into the wind to steady himself against it. All they would need was a downpour and he'd really be battling the elements.

Somewhere overhead the sky crackled, sparked a brilliant blue-white and the heavens opened.

"Did you have to do that?!" Max shouted at him, "I'm trying to concentrate!"

"What?" Andro bit back, startled.

"The world is very suggestible right now. Just stop thinking about what could happen and concentrate on the here and now."

Andro hunched his shoulders against the rain, wildly wishing it away, but it seemed his stray thought had stuck. Wind and rain hit him in the eyes and he wished he hadn't left his waterproof in the car.

Max was very quiet behind him, but Andro decided not to disturb him and kept his eyes on the doorways.

It started in the western end of the circle, immediately opposite the keystone. The familiar crackle of an opening portal ricocheted round the Ring, and a blast of air hit Andro slap in the face. The wind doubled down on him and the ricochet sounded again and again as door after door opened around the Ring. Andro dug his heels into the soft earth, fighting for grip, careful not to knock into and distract Max as he shifted his stance.

Suddenly, Andro's Sight ignited. Like a flare shooting up from the earth, ghostlight lit up the Ring and Andro saw layer upon layer of history being played out as every single journey through every single doorway was enacted before him. Every Traveller and Guardian, Stones that no longer stood, comrades that had fallen, people he'd never known, all of them were here in a

ghostly drama that ran simultaneously, overloading his senses. He couldn't pick apart what was happening when and his mind began to thrum with a piercing screech that he couldn't shut off.

As instantly as it had arrived, the ghostlight was gone, vanished like the snapping closed of a shutter on a magic lantern.

Andro gasped and re-gripped the sword with one hand, wiping rain and tears from his eyes with the other.

The ground heaved and he tumbled sideways, finding himself on his knees. He glanced round for Max, but his brother stood firm as the Stones, towering above him, arms outstretched towards the keystone, his eyes closed.

"Brace yourself!" Max shouted, and Andro felt the ground shudder, increasing in magnitude until Andro was convinced he would fall off it.

Ghostlight glimmered dimly in the middle of the circle and Andro began to make out the silvery outline of some kind of mass. Terrified and fascinated, he couldn't look away as the mass grew and morphed in front of him. Max never moved once, and Andro found himself rooted to the earth, unable to stand again, even as the mass began to take on a familiar form, no bigger than a large pumpkin at first, but rapidly - sickeningly fast - growing.

A city. Yes! It was a city! There was a spire, and... Towers! Castellated towers and battlements and great walls. Buildings; shadows of stone and brick-built buildings backlit by the roaring dark of Time as it protested the passage of an entire place through its boundaries.

Streets, cobbled and stepped, raced between the buildings, coiling up and up, wrapping round and round - a mountain! Not a city. A mountainside. An entire town, nestled in to the side of a mountain, was trying to come through the Stones.

Andro gaped in horror and wonder, unable to fathom how someone would even conceive of doing such a thing. His mouth moved, "What are they doing?"

"This is the work of one among them," Max said with the awful voice that wasn't quite his own, "They are divided."

Andro stared up at his brother and watched as Max turned around and extended his hands again, this time at the growing ghostlight city.

“I will light the beacon,” Max said. Behind him the Major Blue Stone erupted into light. The stone, which usually listed at a 28 degree angle, lurched downwards on its axis and shot out its light in a beam, piercing the image of the ghostlight city and hitting the portal directly opposite it. The quaking of the ground ceased and the ghostlight city evaporated.

The wind died away and as suddenly as it had begun, the rain ceased.

Stunned, Andro stared at Max.

“I di-didn’t know that it did that.”

Max opened his eyes, and catching sight of the beam of light emanating from the keystone, started back and nearly fell over Andro’s sprawled form.

“Bloody Hell! How is it doing that?”

“You did it.” Andro pointed out.

“Did not.”

“Sooo, did too. Well, maybe not you. You were doing your Guardian of the Stones voice again.”

“Bad?”

“No... Epic, I think. GranDa would’ve been proud.”

Max grinned back and offered Andro his hand, helping him to his feet. Gaining his feet, Andro found the pommel of his sword, wiped the blade on his sleeve and sheathed it.

“You aren’t going to defend me?” Max asked, a little hurt.

Andro gestured to the portal absorbing the Stonelight, “Like a sword is going to stand up to that. Besides, if the Guardian is ‘lighting a beacon’ for them they probably aren’t an enemy.”

“Just klutzes,” Max observed, “What did I Guardian-say?”

“Something about, ‘This is the work of one among them’, ‘They are divided’, ‘I will light the beacon.’”

“I didn’t know it was a beacon.” Max rubbed the back of his neck.

“I didn’t know it did that!” Lizzie Flett’s piping voice reminded them that they weren’t the only ones present as she bounded up, hopping from foot to foot in barely contained historian excitement, “Did you know it did that?”

“No!” both brothers answered as one.

In the next moment they were staggering as the ground jolted once, beneath their feet, like a boat coming in to dock too fast.

Disentangling themselves, Andro and Max got themselves upright before hauling the good doctor to her feet. Dusting themselves down, they surveyed the Ring. The beacon was off again.

“Everyone all right?” Max asked into the silence.

“Light’s gone out,” Lizzie observed.

“Thank you for that astute observation, Dr Flett,” Andro retorted and earned a reproving look from his brother. Andro stuck two fingers up at him, just to prove that he still could.

“Hello?”

The three of them froze.

“Hello? Can you hear me? Are you Present or Past?”

The three of them turned.

A woman stood just inside the Ring, in front of the portal that the stonelight had poured into. She wasn’t much older than Andro himself. She stood, deliberately assuming non-threatening body language, arms carefully out to her sides, a green cloth gripped in one gloved hand and some kind of branch in the other. She was wearing a white cloth shirt that was about two hundred years out of date, some kind rough fabric trouser fastened with myriad belts and buckles, brown boots, a pair of goggles and a scarf looped round her neck. Her face was smudged with dirt and dust except where the goggles had evidently been.

“Hello?” she called again, shaking the green cloth, “Can you hear me?”

“We can hear you,” Max replied, and the woman’s whole demeanour altered. She straightened up to her full height, her face stretching into a huge smile that seemed to encompass her entire being, and she flicked the green cloth over a shoulder. She leaned round towards the portal and shouted into it, “We’re when-how again!”

<When-how?> Andro mouthed to his brother, and both of them shrugged.

“Hello..., er... all,” the woman said again, turning back to them, “Sorry

about all that. I imagine we gave you all a bit of a fright.” She hopped forward, staring for a moment down at the grass, then looking forward, hopped again on tip toes across the grass, hand outstretched.

“Fright?!” Lizzie shouted hysterically, “Fright?!”

“Yes,” the woman’s smile turned sheepish and she shrugged, “Bit of a communication error amongst the Collective. The Chief Seer thought he’d said ‘Connect with the Doorways’, the Fourth Under-Doorman thought he’d said ‘Pass through the Doorways’. You know how it is.”

Andro looked at Lizzie, “Fourth Under-Doorman?”

“Do we have one of those?” Lizzie hissed back.

Max, ignoring them both, reached out to accept the offered hand and smiled, “Hi. Max Crabbe, Chief Guardian of Beacran’s Ring. Welcome to Bickering on Sea.”

The woman grasped back and her grin – if it were possible – widened, “Karenza Everard. First Lady of the Court of Welcome. Sorry for crashing into your Circle.”

“Things you only hear in Bickering.” Andro muttered.

Lizzie Flett stifled a laugh.

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