

Chapter Twenty One

As the winter weather cleared away into spring, Tom and the others were required to spend more time outside. There were always chores to do, organised by a roster pinned weekly to the messroom notice board. These menial tasks fitted in between the practical and classroom training sessions, although they were not particularly onerous and compared favourably, in Tom's view, with the work he had undertaken on the farm the previous year.

One morning, he was part of a duty party working outside the front of Cliviger Grange, tidying away the detritus of winter. The sun was shining, and there was a distinct sense of spring bursting forth in the air. He paused in his activity, and stood up straight, stretching his back while looking around at the house and grounds.

The main building itself was constructed from heavy blocks of local stone. At one time, it appeared, it had been a grand house for some moneyed member of the local landed gentry. The front of the old house was an imposing frontage with a south facing aspect, broken by numerous large windows allowing plenty of light deep into the interior.

The main entrance was approached by a flight of stone steps at the centre of the front façade. At one time, this must have been an imposing, even majestic doorway, but the stairs were now rather worn, and in fact seldom used since it was rather slippery in all but the driest of weathers. Staff and regular visitors were encouraged to use one or other of the side entrances, including one which Tom was convinced was originally designed specifically for gardeners and other muddy outdoor staff.

In front of the house, there was a gravel driveway formed into a circle around a well-tilled flowerbed surrounding a central stone fountain, now dry. The bed was filled with regimented rows of spring-flowering plants. Tom wondered if the water would flow in the fountain later in the year.

The original house had been augmented by a stable block off to the east, with a courtyard entered through an archway and protected from the winds by many trees and hedges. Perhaps, Tom mused, the trees also prevented the stables from being visible and spoiling the sweeping appearance of the main house.

It seemed that most of the stables were now used as garages; at least, Tom had not encountered any of the unmistakable, not to mention pungent, side-effects of horses on the premises. The garages now accommodated a considerable number of lorries, all ex-army surplus, and a small fleet of cars. The rooms over the old stables were permanently occupied by a staff of drivers and mechanics.

Tom, who was good with machinery, had previously spent some time chatting to the mechanics over mugs of tea. His previous experiences with the upkeep of motor vehicles as an adolescent had allowed him to slip easily into a bantering conversation with the maintenance personnel. Unsurprisingly, he had discovered that several of the younger men had been in the armed forces during the War while Edgar, their grizzled foreman, whose stern appearance belied his basically friendly manner, looked as if he had seen service in the previous global conflict.

Normally, when chores were to be done, Major Markham and the other senior staff members would patrol the grounds, offering advice and encouragement according to some internal performance scale that Tom had not yet quite fathomed. Tom had observed – from a distance, thankfully – that if a task was not being performed adequately, the Major had quite a repertoire of sharp comments and disapproving looks to make his view clear. So far, Tom had managed to avoid being on the receiving end of one of these quietly-delivered reprimands.

On this particular morning, there was no one to be seen. Feeling a little like he was skiving, Tom put down his broom and wandered over to the stable block with the intent of cadging a cuppa. On entering the usually crowded room used as an office and mess for the garage staff, he was welcomed warmly by Edgar, who was sitting on his own reading the sports page of a newspaper.

“Help yourself to a brew,” he said, waving casually in the direction of a teapot warming on the hearth.

Tom found a mug and poured himself hot milky tea, adding two spoons of sugar from the bowl on the table. He then pulled out a chair and sat down, sipping the hot drink.

It appeared that the fleet of vehicles was in daily use, ferrying members of the Guardians to and fro. Tom had supposed that the causeway itself was the usual destination for most trips, and he now made some casual remark to that effect.

Edgar laughed aloud, causing the younger man to look up from his tea.

“Oh, we get all over,” the foreman responded dryly, “You’d be surprised at the places we get to drive.”

“Really?” Tom responded, genuinely confused, “Such as?”

“Oh, no doubt you’ll be briefed on other locations sometime,” he suggested vaguely.

More than that he was not to be drawn into saying, it seemed.

Just at that moment, two of the ubiquitous army trucks pulled up into the yard, one of which was spluttering loudly and emitting a cloud of oily smoke.

The driver of the stricken lorry jumped out, coughing from the dense fumes which had worked their way into the cab.

“Looks like that one’s blown a gasket,” Tom remarked.

Edgar grimaced.

“You’re right there, lad,” he replied, pursing his lips speculatively as he considered the activities necessary to repair the vehicle, “And they only just managed to nurse it back to base too, I’ll wager.”

Edgar jumped up and bustled outside to engage in an urgent conference with the driver of the incapacitated lorry and one of the men who had just emerged from the garages. There was a short interval with much waving of hands and a fair amount of scratching of heads then, decisions apparently made, Edgar came back into the office already spouting instructions.

Tom could see that he was probably only going to be in the way right now. He finished his tea and rinsed out the tin mug under the tap which was located just outside the door. As he stood outside, his eye ran along the well-trimmed beech hedge separating the stables from the more formal gardens which had, he presumed, been laid out when the House was originally constructed.

Through an opening in the hedge, he became aware of a narrow path he had not previously noticed. The pathway extended from behind the stable block in a direction he had never explored. Intrigued, Tom made his way along the trail, which wending its way between a rather overgrown clump of rhododendrons and a morass of brambles, the branches of the trees overhead adding to the effect of a tunnel. The passageway was obviously rather infrequently travelled, with leaves and other organic detritus littered everywhere, and blackberry runners extending across the weed-infested gravel of the path itself.

After a minute or so, the winding passage opened out into a more well-tended area of lawn on Tom’s left, surrounded by mature trees. Stone statues and urns decorated the garden here and there, looking a little worn and lichenous from a century of weathering.

In contrast, there were a series of newer buildings on the other side. There was a row of Nissen huts – temporary accommodation erected during wartime, made from corrugated iron, tin-plated to discourage rust, and painted in olive drab camouflage colours. The ironwork was curved into an arch over a steel framework set on concrete footings, giving a strong impression of oversize sewer pipes sunk half-way into the ground. These buildings were cheap and rapidly erected but rather ugly. Tom suspected that they would be around for decades, despite their professed temporary nature.

Further to his right, Tom could see more substantial buildings, possibly pre-war or perhaps built during the war itself. These were brick-built single-storey buildings with flat roofs, patterned like a line of capital-H letters. Tom thought that the blocks resembled a wartime military hospital, especially as they were painted a rather insipid colour he knew as ‘eggshell blue’.

Tom realised that he was aware of the existence of these buildings, which he understood were used as barracks for qualified Guardians, and indeed housed a small infirmary, although he had not appreciated that they could be reached so easily from the stables. The pathway ran behind the barracks buildings and curved away from the H-block at the end of the row.

Tom strolled along, still unobserved as far as he knew. He rounded a corner and came upon an old walled garden constructed from crumbling grey stones. Entering the private grounds through an archway, he could see lines of pruned and trained fruit trees, ancient in appearance, with green moss standing out on the grey-brown bark of the branches. The trees were now beginning to show blossoms in the spring sunshine.

On his left, a row of greenhouses and sheds for garden equipment had been more recently constructed in a ‘lean-to’ style against the wall. The gardens looked well-tended, with no sign of fallen leaves or last year’s rotten fruit; clearly, someone regularly tidied the garden, although Tom could not recall whether it appeared on the duty roster.

There was only one other way out of the garden, through a matching archway set in the wall opposite. At one time, it appeared, the fourth wall also had an arched entrance, but that appeared to have been walled up long ago.

Tom followed the gravel path directly across the garden. On the far side, he discovered the remains of a tennis court, now heavily overgrown. The wire-mesh fence which once prevented lost balls had long since removed, but the metal fence supports were still visible in the area, in places, poking through the undergrowth. Lining

the far side of the tennis court was a line of trees marking the boundary of the grounds, with high and thick hedges through which he could occasionally catch a glimpse of the farm-land beyond.

The track he had been following petered out at the tennis court. Presumably, Tom thought, the path had been laid to access the courts, and never had extended any further. It was all very quiet and peaceful, with only the faintest of country sounds, at the edge of hearing.

He turned, about to retrace his steps. Just at that moment, he observed two people talking, their heads close together, and almost completely obscured by foliage. He could see them both looking around, as if checking that they were unobserved. Their movements were furtive, even – there was no other word for it – *skulking*.

To his amazement, Tom recognised one of the men as Major Markham from his uniform. But who was the other person? Tom thought he recognised him, but could not remember where from. Belatedly, he realised that he was experiencing that phenomenon where one readily identified people when they were in a location where they were expected, but failed to recognise them at all in an unfamiliar environment. The other man was Bram's uncle, Hamet.

There was a noise from the other side of the tennis court, a sharp crack as if someone had trodden on a stick blown down by the winter storms. Tom started, thinking for a moment that he had made the sound himself. The two men looked around anxiously, then appeared to be ready to move off back in the directions of the Grange.

Tom decided, for reasons he could not quite put a finger on, that he did not want to be caught watching – if only because he should have been working on his chores, and he did not want to be on the receiving end of one of the Major's looks.

He turned tail and ran, as quickly and as quietly as he could. His ability to move rapidly through narrow spaces certainly came to the fore. He was sure that he could have been heard by Hamet and Markham, as well as whoever – or whatever – was lurking on the other side of the courts, but there was no sign of close pursuit. In a matter of minutes, he was back past the stables and had picked up his broom as if nothing had happened.