

PROLOGUE

Autumn had settled comfortably over Tanglewood, spreading its colorful fingers wide and summoning forth a transformation of startling elegance. Overhead, the luxurious green canopy had thinned rapidly, allowing beams of bright sunlight to pierce the widening gaps and gently kiss the earth below. The trees and foliage that once painted the landscape with many hues of rich greens had added additional colors to their palate. The leaves that still remained on the trees were splashed with a marvelous spectrum of reds, yellows, and oranges, a few pinks and purples, and everything in between.

In the early hours of the day, the forest glistened under a delicate coating of morning dew, and the leaves sparkled when they caught the sunlight, adorning the branches like dangling jewels. The many that had already fallen decorated the pathways, creating a patchwork of vibrant colors along the forest floor.

I enjoyed the warming site as I strolled casually along the path, crunching the leaves beneath my heavy feet. I grasped a tall walking stick in my left hand, and a soothing flask of hot blackberry tea in my right, which helped banish the sleep from my eyes. It had become somewhat of a morning ritual to step outside and embark upon a brief walk before settling down to begin another day of writing.

It was a peaceful morning, as it often is in Tanglewood. Last night, a gentle rain had fallen, and some areas of the pathway were still slippery with mud. Had I not been occasionally looking down in an effort to avoid the deeper mud, I might not have seen the footprints.

To be more precise, they were hoof prints, and quite large, almost equal to those of a horse. But upon closer inspection, I could easily tell that no horse had made these tracks. For one thing, the imprints were cloven, and judging their placement, the creature that made these tracks walked on two legs, not four.

Such an oddity did not surprise me; this was Tanglewood, after all, and the fey were many and varied. But never before had I known one to come so close to this area, which was somewhat of a sanctuary. I believe Monohan had placed some sort of enchantment over his home and the surrounding area to ward off curious sheehogue that may not be as friendly as others. But the druid was gone, and I had to admit that I was rather nervous.

The strange tracks disappeared completely before I could completely discern whether the fey that had made

them had left the area or not. Either it had stepped more lightly, or the ground had been too solid to allow any more impressions to be made.

I decided to return back to the clearing and the safety of Monohan's home. I had not wandered far, and I would feel better with a sturdy door set firmly betwixt myself and whatever else might be roaming the 'wood this morning.

Stepping lightly but quickly, I made my way back along the path. As I did so, I sensed movement within the woods to my left. I stopped in my tracks and looked about, scanning the perimeter with as much scrutiny as my old eyes could muster, and listened intently to the surrounding noises of the 'wood.

Several moments passed, and I could detect nothing hiding within the undergrowth, and no noise reached my ears other than the many birdcalls overhead. The birds themselves did not seem to share my concern. That did not necessarily mean there was nothing there, however. The sheehogue were quite adept at hiding, and the morning mist had not completely dissipated, further obscuring my vision and providing suitable cover for anything that might be seeking to remain concealed.

Whatever it was, I hoped it would remain there, and pay me no mind as I returned to the clearing, and the immense beech tree in which Monohan had made his home.

I made no effort to stay quiet. If one of the fey was lurking about within the 'wood, then it surely knew I was here.

Ahead, a cluster of juniper trees lined the pathway, and heavy branches laden across each other, forming a small tunnel of sorts. Just beyond was the clearing.

A sudden rush of movement directly to my left startled me. I barely had time to turn in an attempt to defend myself from the large form that towered menacingly over me.

Had I been more experienced in the 'wood, I might have been better able to ward off the oncoming attack. But alas, I was just the Scribe, and possessed no other skills that would serve me better at the moment.

I managed only to hold out my walking stick as a meager defense. A strong blow knocked it from my hand and cracked it in two as though it were as brittle as the dried leaves I stood upon.

A heavy weight drove me to the ground and held me there. I struggled only a moment before realizing that any attempt to move was pointless.

I dared open my eyes, and found a set staring back at me. They were tinged yellow, with reddish-brown pupils, and their forbidding coldness quickly stole the warmth away from my body.

The creature spoke softly, but there was no denying the intimidating strength in its words.

“Who are you? How do you come to be in these woods?”

Surprisingly, I found the courage to answer.

“I came through the Gateway. The birch trees.”

It's eyes narrowed as its lips curled into a sneer. “Did you?”

I nodded.

The beast atop me closed its eyes and sniffed my breath. A moment passed, and when it opened its eyes again, they were no less bitter.

“There is nothing of the fey about you.”

I nodded again. “If you mean my blood, you are correct. But I am told by Monohan the druid that I possess a Soul of the ‘Wood.’”

At this, I saw its eyes relax but a little.

Another moment passed, and it said, “Perhaps you do.”

It released its hold on me and stood. It made no offer to help me to my own feet. As I pushed myself off the ground, trying to quell my wavering legs, I saw at last what had stalked me and knocked me down.

Two muscular legs, covered in coarse fur, supported an equally muscular torso. The creature’s face was slightly hidden in shadow, but the sunlight highlighted two horns protruding from its forehead, and the telltale hooves in place of feet.

There was no questioning what manner of fey stood before me. It was a satyr, and its stern expression was one of stone as it studied me.

I tried my best to compose myself. There was obviously no point in trying to run, as the satyr could probably take me down again effortlessly. But I also somehow understood that the satyr would not attempt to harm me again.

As I brushed away the bits of leaves and dirt that still clung to my clothing, the satyr spied my flask lying on the ground nearby, and retrieved it.

The remainder of the tea had spilled, but the scent of it was still strong.

The satyr inhaled deeply from the opening of the flask.

“Blackberry tea,” it said. “It has been a very long time since I have tasted it.”

“I can make you some,” I replied. Apparently, common sense had missed its cue.

The satyr offered me the slightest of smiles. At least, I hoped it was a smile.

“I’m looking for the one they call the Scribe,” the satyr said, handing me the flask. “If you know of Monohan, then perhaps you know of the Scribe as well.”

I had to admit, I was puzzled, and still more than a bit tense. What this beast might want with me, I could not fathom. But it would do me no good to lie. I had a feeling it would smell deception as easily as it had recognized the odor of the tea.

“I am the Scribe.”

If the satyr was surprised, he did not reveal it. He remained expressionless, but nodded.

“I would hear a tale,” he said.

Now I was surprised, and I did not hide it as easily as the satyr did. But at least now I knew the reason for the satyr’s appearance, and I was able to calm my heart, which I realized had been steadily pounding against my chest.

“I would be happy to tell you one,” I said, “but I only know what the trees have told me.”

The satyr ignored me. “I would hear a tale of Colin, Blood of the Fey.”

There was no mistaking the satyr’s tone. It was clearly more of a demand than a request. I shuddered to think what the satyr’s reaction might be were I to refuse.

Still, I would be more than willing to grant the satyr’s request, as I was always ready to hear more of Colin, the boy with the Blood of the Fey.

Unfortunately, my conversations with the ‘wood were usually purely one-sided. I could listen to the weird and wonderful voices of the trees, but as I was unable to talk back to them, I found myself at their mercy as to what they wished to reveal.

“Sometimes,” I told the satyr, “the trees will tell me what I wish to know. More often than not, they speak of Colin.”

The satyr seemed satisfied with this, but I quickly added, “But not always.”

This did not concern the satyr. “I think they will oblige you this time,” he stated.

I wondered how he might have known that, but somehow knew I would not receive an answer should I deign to ask him the question.

I managed a small sigh. Such mysteries, though somewhat irritating at times, were no longer unusual.

During my time in the ‘wood, residing in the comforting shelter of Monohan’s tree, I’d gotten used to the druid’s cryptic ramblings and riddles. He had a penchant for disclosing as little information as possible.

I think he took particular amusement in toying with me, answering my questions with more questions, or

worse yet, riddles that seemed to make no sense. I think he did it on purpose just to watch my expression change. I knew it was lighthearted fun on his part; he meant no harm by it. I often caught him suppressing a few chuckles as I pestered him for more information about Tanglewood. Still, it frustrated me that he kept his knowledge of the 'wood guarded, like the squirrels hoarding their nuts for the coming winter.

Listen to the trees, he would always eventually say, and then I knew I would gather no more answers from him. And so, with little choice as to do otherwise, I would listen to the trees, to their low rumbling tones that reverberated within my bones and made images rise to the surface of mind. I'd gotten used to this method of receiving information as well.

I have to admit, I was a mite jealous of Colin, who possessed the *dru-cainnt*; the ability to communicate with the trees on a deeper level than I. It was a talent he was just beginning to learn during my *First Tale*, but it was bound to grow stronger in time.

I was also jealous of his youth, and of the fact that he had found Tanglewood so easily, when I had searched for evidence of the fey for so very, very long, and in fact had given up hope. I was old now, and even though my time in Tanglewood and the continued sustenance of the tea had chased away the weariness from my bones, I would likely never be able to romp through the 'wood as exuberantly as young Colin.

But I at least had my own important part to play in the history of the 'wood, and it was nothing to frown upon.

If you remember my first tale, then you'll also remember that Monahan had sought me out specifically, drawn me to Tanglewood, and appointed me *The Scribe*. I was given the task of hearing the tales of Tanglewood, and putting them to paper, so that a proper history might be recorded and instilled within the *Well of Knowledge*, a sacred place deep within the heart of the 'wood.

You might think this a boring, tedious task; sitting within the confines of the tree, remarkable as it is, and spending countless hours writing about other's experiences in Tanglewood instead of living my own.

However, through my communication with the trees of the 'wood, I was able to live Colin's adventures as though I had walked beside him through them all. I saw all the wonderful sites glimpsed by his own eyes, feeling his elation and his wonderment as much as my own. I also felt his fear as well when he was captured by Ailil, the king of the sprites, and his frightening ordeal in the Below. And I breathed a heavy sigh of relief as the trees regaled me with the story of Colin's magical performance with the *Lon Dubh* whistle in Thorn Grove, in which peace was renewed between Ailil and Cox, the king of the brownies.

I longed to hear more, and apparently the satyr also yearned to hear a tale of Colin.

"Well then, friend satyr, let us go to the tree, and I shall tell of Colin, should the trees oblige me, as you say they will."

The satyr nodded, and we began walking back along the remainder of the path. The satyr paused for a

moment, and then reached into the undergrowth. He pulled forth a long, stout branch that must have fallen from one of the trees. "Allow me to offer you a new walking stick," he said, handing it to me.

"Thank you," I replied, humbly accepting the stick.

We returned to the clearing a moment later, and I found that the door set within the immense trunk of the old beech tree remained open, as I had left it. All else within the clearing appeared much the same as well, but something still troubled my mind.

Despite the bright sun, the morning was a chilly one, and the smoldering remains of last night's kindling would not keep the interior of the tree warm for very long. The iron teakettle on the pivoting arm beside the hearth had likely already cooled, and I certainly couldn't serve the satyr cold tea! I'd have to fetch more wood soon. Or perhaps today I would use some peat instead.

The peat was made of compressed vegetation, gathered from a bog and formed into crude bricks. Monohan had cautioned me to use it sparingly, or I would find myself having to gather wood daily in the middle of winter. The peat was meant to be kept in reserve, used in the winter when the regular firewood ran low.

Still, there was nothing quite like the smell of a peat-fire. When burning, the small bars of dark turf illuminated the hearth with glowing embers, and released a rich, earthy aroma, the scent of nature and the oldest of fey that were at home deep in the 'wood. And when coupled with a warm mug of blackberry tea, well, there simply was no comparison.

The very thought of such delights chased away my lingering concerns and I easily convinced myself that one or two bars of peat would not deplete Monohan's stock too much.

"Where is Monohan the druid," the satyr asked as we approached the tree.

"He departed the area some time ago," I answered, "on a matter of some urgency. He may not be back for several weeks, at least. I wish I could tell you where he might be going and what he might be up to, but he told me very little as he left, (as he often does), and only remarked that there were things he must attend to."

The satyr nodded, but if he possessed any more knowledge on the subject, he did not offer it.

Instead, he asked me about Colin, and what had transpired after the boy had played the Lon Dubh and mended the rift between Cox and Ailil.

"You know of that tale?" I asked, surprised.

"I know some of it. But I wish to know more."

"Well, after that, things in Tanglewood were rather uneventful. Colin returned to the 'wood often that summer, spending many days fishing and exploring parts of the 'wood with Ailfrid, or talking with Bairtlemead Muffingrow. The druid had become not just a friend, but somewhat of a teacher as well.

"Sometimes, the elfin girl Deidre would join them, but she was also often quite busy, seeing to the affairs of her father and the elders, as she had recently been initiated into a higher order among their kind. As you might know, the elves are a secretive lot, keeping mainly to themselves in Primrose Valley, but using the *sheeaghban*

to keep watch over much of what transpires in Tanglewood.”

The satyr grunted, but I could not tell if it was a grunt of acknowledgement or distaste.

I bade the satyr to enter the tree, and then followed behind. I left the door open so that the bright sunlight would find itself welcome in Monohan’s home as well.

As I walked through the doorway, a subtle wind caressed the branches of the surrounding trees. A faint tickle brushed up against the soft edge of my thoughts, urging me to return to the table and take up my quill once again.

It was then that I knew for certain I was to be told another tale of Colin. I was thankful that I would be able to satisfy the satyr’s subtle command.

Before I did so, I made sure to tend to the fire. As I did so, the satyr took a seat at the sturdy table in the center of the tree, formed from the substance of the inner tree itself.

“Do you reside nearby?” I inquired, daring a bit of small talk.

The satyr obliged me. “I did once, long ago. But I have been away for a very long time. There are events I have missed. I believe your tale will reveal them to me.”

I nodded, hoping it would be so. After the teakettle had been suitably reheated, I quickly refilled my tea and offered a mug to the satyr. It seemed rather small in his large hands, but he accepted it graciously, and I found myself more at ease.

I sat myself down at the table across from the satyr and wasted no more time. Opening up my senses to the

old voices, I welcomed them into my mind; the low, rumbling chant of the earth, and the soft winds that eased gently through the waving foliage, foreign whispers in my head that I was easily able to interpret.

Just as fall was steadily encroaching upon Tanglewood now, it had of course done so many times before, and it was the beginning of this crisp season in which Colin had found great adventure and serious danger in Tanglewood once more...

CHAPTER ONE

Colin's weekdays were spent at school, where although his body was held captive behind dull gray walls, his mind was able to escape to a faraway place where fantasy dispelled reality and homework never existed. He did not mind being picked last for teams in gym class, he did not care when the other boys teased him because he was too quiet, and he did not respond when his father asked him why he never brought home any friends to play with.

He *did* have friends. He longed to tell his parents about Ailfrid, the ferrish, a boy like himself, only with eyes the color of pure silver, and two small horns atop his head, peeking through sandy hair. And there was Deidre, the raven-haired elfin girl who had helped Colin and Ailfrid on their quest to retrieve the *Lon Dubh* whistle from the small-in-size but large-in-energy brownies. And of course, there was Bairtlemead Muffingrow, the friendly druid who had promised to

show Colin how to better use his newfound magical ability, the *dru-cainnt*. Bairtlemead had also hinted that there may be additional magics lurking within Colin's blood, but they had yet to be discovered.

And then there was the mystery of Colin's blood itself, the Blood of the Fey. How Colin had come to have fey blood mingled with his own was still a tale waiting to be told. It was bound to be a tale much more interesting than what seemed like another endless history lesson, at the very least.

"Colin? Colin, are you paying attention?" The teacher's words intruded upon his thoughts, chasing away his daydreams and bringing the classroom back into focus. The confines of the school seemed muted and lifeless when compared with the savored memories of Tanglewood. The only enjoyable sight to be found within the classroom was the cloud of floating dust motes, glistening in the sunlight that streamed through the windows. They reminded Colin of dandelion spores, being pushed lazily through the air by calming breezes blowing softly along the banks of Copper Stream.

Secretly longing for the strength (or perhaps a bit of fey magic) to knock down the surrounding walls and escape into the wild trees of Tanglewood, Colin sighed and mumbled an apology to the teacher. Returning to his schoolwork, he tried to avoid continually looking at the clock.

Mondays at school were like a slow-moving line of cars, in which Colin found himself seated in the very last vehicle, afraid he would never reach his destination. Tuesdays were substantially the same, with little ground

gained. Wednesday offered a glimmer of hope, Colin's destination barely in sight, just peeking over the horizon. Thursday found him coasting down a hill, gathering speed, and Friday was at last a short, swift ride until he reached his destination; the weekend!

Whereas Colin had spent many of his summer days in Tanglewood with Ailfrid and Doc Muffingrow, once school had begun, his frequent visits to the 'wood had diminished to barely three days a week. He would leave home after dinner on Friday evening, and return to his home Sunday evening just before dark. Waiting for each successive weekend was often torturous.

Colin longed for recent days in which he could wander off into Tanglewood at a whim, but the next summer was awfully far away. Additionally, his parents had already been summoned to a conference with his teacher, in which they were told that Colin often lacked concentration in class.

This information of course did not sit well with his parents. They subsequently warned him that unless he began to show improvement in school, they would no longer allow him to go 'camping' in the woods each weekend.

Of course, should that situation arise, Colin could simply give his parents more of the enchanted muffins he had stashed away, grown by Doc Muffingrow especially for just such an occasion. Once the muffins were consumed, his parents would be magically charmed, and easily compelled into allowing Colin to do whatever he desired at the slightest hint of suggestion. However, Colin had also come to realize

that to place his parents under such a spell would be terribly wrong.

In fact, he found it to be difficult enough lying to his parents about going camping each weekend. Well, technically, he *was* camping in the woods to some degree, but he could never tell his parents that he was actually entering a secret part of the woods normally protected by fey magic. For one thing, they would never believe such a story. The only way to prove the validity of his claim would be to actually to show them Tanglewood. Unfortunately, that would also mean betraying the *sheebogue*, all the fey creatures whose magic had kept the 'wood safe from the outside world populated by *kynney deiney* – humankind.

Likewise, using the muffins to magically charm his parents against their will would be betraying their trust in him. He had done so only once before, somewhat out of necessity, in order to be able to return to the 'wood for a few days without causing his parents to needlessly worry about him.

Had his parents known what had befallen Colin shortly thereafter, they would have been very worried indeed!

In his overzealousness to return to the 'wood, Colin had fallen victim to a trap laid by the sprites, and for some time, it seemed as if there would be no escape from their underground lair. Worse still, Colin's own spirit had been in severe danger, nearly enslaved forever by the sprite king Ailil and his flock. Luckily, with the help of Ailfrid and Deidre, things had been set right. However, Colin had come to believe that such events

might have never occurred in the first place if he had not used the muffins to charm his parents, an act that now seemed undeniably wrong.

And so he resisted making use of the muffins again, and forced himself to attempt to pay attention as best he could in school during the day, and complete his homework at night to the best of his ability. He certainly didn't enjoy it, and at times he even hated it. However, he was also smart enough to know that school *was* important, and doing well in school made him feel a bit better about continually lying to his parents.

Strangely enough, for the most part his mother and father had done little else to dissuade Colin from his disappearances into the woods each weekend. Colin puzzled over this for a while, for it seemed odd indeed that his parents would remain content to allow him to journey into the woods unsupervised each weekend. He supposed it may be a few lingering effects of the muffins, even after having been consumed months ago. Or perhaps they simply trusted him enough to be careful and safe. As far as they knew, the woods were not dangerous, and they also believed he was not wandering very far (another small lie).

Regardless, Colin was not going to waste time fretting over his unusually accommodating parents. He was happy enough in the knowledge that after each week of schoolwork drudgery, he could return to the 'wood for a few days worth of adventure and excitement.



It was the third Friday of October. Colin had already finished his dinner and bid his parents goodbye. Stepping onto a light path that led from his yard into the large expanse of woods behind his house, a smile spread slowly across his face.

As usual, he carried with him a small sleeping bag, a lantern, and a few other items necessary to maintain the illusion that he was simply camping in the woods. He normally stashed the sleeping bag and the remainder of the camping gear near the Gateway, so that he could easily retrieve it on the way back home. The only items he found necessary to keep with him upon entering the 'wood was a small pocketknife, some snacks, a change of clothes, and the wooden mask given to him by Ailfrid, which allowed him to see in the dark when worn. He carried these items in a small backpack worn over his shoulders.

He soon strolled deeper into the woods. The sun had not yet set, but the foliage overhead kept the interior of the forest somewhat dark, allowing only a few brilliant rays of sunlight to strike the ground below. Warmer weather and a fair bit of rain had kept the woods green and lush longer than usual.

Colin had been looking forward to the onset of fall, his favorite time of year, but it seemed as though it had not fully arrived yet.

After walking for some time, having stepped off the path a short while ago, Colin began the familiar approach to the Gateway, the entrance to Tanglewood.

Colin had walked this route several times since his first visit to the 'wood, and likely could have done it now with his eyes closed. After placing the sleeping bag and the other items he didn't need within a small grouping of trees, safely hidden within the undergrowth, he continued on.

He soon spied the trail of white rocks whose glow was only visible to someone with blood of the fey, and then the copse of rune-inscribed birch trees. The branches of the birch trees leaned over one another to form an archway, which acted as the entrance to the 'wood.

Colin passed beneath the Gateway, took a few steps, and then gasped in surprise. He blinked a few times to ensure that his surroundings were real, and to be certain that he had not been transported to some unknown destination. The 'wood looked remarkably different than when he last visited only a week ago.

Apparently, the cusp of fall had already arrived in Tanglewood, not content in waiting for the area outside the Gateway to catch up to it. The sudden changing of the seasons had cast the 'wood in an entirely new light. Colin stared about in wonderment at the breathtaking transformation, marveling at the beauty of the woods as he slowly took in the scene.

The trees were a kaleidoscope of vibrant colors, and the slowly sinking sun cast a fiery glow across the whole of the 'wood, weaving golden highlights throughout the bushes and brambles.

A brief whisper of wind waved the branches of the surrounding trees. It was as though they were

welcoming Colin back to the 'wood, and the boy smiled to himself.

Upon entering Tanglewood, all thoughts of parents and school and homework were dispelled from Colin's mind, and he was instantly comforted by the myriad scents of the earth and the air.

Colin set out for the home of Bairtlemead Muffingrow. A thick carpet of multicolored leaves crunched gently underfoot as he began the walk toward Root Path. After a few moments, he stopped and removed his shoes and socks, placing them into his backpack. He then smiled as the soles of his feet met the cool forest floor.

Colin now walked quietly, his steps barely making a sound even as they pressed upon dried leaves and fallen twigs. He had become quite light-footed throughout his time in the 'wood, and more skilled at moving stealthily when he concentrated but a little. He attributed this to his fey blood, as most of the fey possessed an inherent capacity for hiding and moving silently through Tanglewood.

Colin also preferred to walk barefoot over the ground, as Ailfrid and many of the sheehogue did. Shoes or sneakers had come to feel clumsy and heavy. Walking barefoot felt more natural to Colin, and feeling the earth beneath the soles of his feet made him feel as though he shared a deeper connection with the 'wood.

When the woods began to thicken, he knew he was getting closer to his destination. Sure enough, the beginning of Root Path came into view a few moments later. The base of the path was a tangled mass of thick

roots stretched across the ground, spreading forth from the surrounding trees that grew tall and wide on either side of the passage, barring entry into the denser portion of the forest.

Colin paused to put his socks and sneakers back on. While he was able to walk barefoot comfortably over smooth, flat terrain, the irregular surface of Root Path was much too rough for the soles of his feet.

Colin picked his way along the path carefully, as many of the protruding roots were obscured by the masses of fallen leaves, and he did not want to trip. He also remembered the sprite hole that lay somewhere along the path, and even though he had since made peace with Ailil, he could not suppress a shudder as the memory of his entrapment in the Below rose to the surface of his mind.

It was an unwelcome memory, but such dark thoughts were easily banished when the sparkling waters of the lake that bordered the west edge of Root Path began to make itself known. The trees to Colin's left thinned, and he beheld the wonderful vista of the lake glistening under the setting autumn sun.

The lake was further framed by the trees across the shoreline that displayed their foliage splendidly in rich colors. Vivid reds, yellows and oranges mingled with a few surviving greens that were reluctant to change, and the branches waved idly in the soft wind.

Colin spied the bridge that crossed Copper Stream a short distance ahead. The small winding river that branched off the lake and quietly meandered east was yet another spectacle. The sinking sun glanced off the

bright, copper-colored water of the stream like a brilliant flame. Indeed, the light was so intense, Colin had to squint his eyes or avoid looking directly at it.

But as Colin came to the end of Root Path, and the forest opened up again along the banks of the lake and Copper Stream, he savored a moment to stop and look around, as he had upon each return to the 'wood. It was always all so beautiful to behold.

Colin spread his arms wide and shut his eyes against the sun, feeling the warmth on his face, and the briskness of the wind as it moved through his fingers. Opening his eyes again to the scene before him, he was rewarded with a vivid painting of stunning clarity. He sighed, happily content to be back once more.



As usual, Doc Muffingrow was waiting for Colin on the opposite bank of Copper Stream. Bairtlemead's home was modest in appearance, seemingly just a small hut of wood and stone set up against the tall rock face that bordered the north side of the stream. But the inside of the dwelling was much larger, as additional rooms had been carved into the earth and stone. With the door behind Bairtlemead standing open, Colin could already smell the heavy aromas of dried herbs hanging from the rafters, the enticing perfume of blackberry tea warming in a pot suspended over the fire, and of course, the warming scent of freshly grown muffins.

Bairtlemead spotted Colin and smiled and laughed, clapping his pudgy hands together. His round-rim

glasses bounced on his nose, and the squat man rocked back and forth on his feet, which were obscured by layers of heavy brown robes.

Colin laughed as well. The sight of the comical yet highly resilient man always managed to produce a smile from the boy's lips, at the very least. He ran the remainder of the way, kicking up copper-hued water as he crossed the shallow portion of the stream to the other side where Bairtlemead waited.

"Colin! Welcome back!"

"Thanks! Look at this place," Colin said, gesturing at the trees. "Fall came so fast!"

"It often does in Tanglewood. As *Sahwen* approaches, the 'wood changes accordingly."

"*Sahwen*? What's that?"

"It is the ending of one season, and the beginning of the next. It is normally a time of great festivity in the 'wood. The *kynney deiney* have a word for it as well. I believe you are more familiar with it as All Hallows' Eve, or Halloween."

"I didn't know you had Halloween here!"

"We don't celebrate Halloween here in Tanglewood like the *kynney deiney* do. They have changed the meaning of *Sahwen* over time. You won't find the 'wood full of sheehogue children running around knocking on trees, looking for treats and such. But many of the *fey do* have a celebration, with a grand feast and a roaring bonfire!"

Colin grinned at the prospect.

"But you should know," the druid continued, "in Tanglewood, *Sahwen* is much more than a night of celebration. It is a powerful essence, affecting the whole

of the ‘wood and everything in it. In fact, Tanglewood has *already* changed. But never mind that now, I’m sure you will see soon enough! Come inside, come inside!”

Bairtlemead turned and ambled his way into the hut, and Colin eagerly followed.

Shutting the door behind him, Colin sat at the sturdy wooden table, and Bairtlemead promptly served him a mug of blackberry tea and a plate of muffins.

“Just grown,” the druid said, with a wink and a smile.

Colin smiled back, and began stuffing his face with the moist cake. He was sorry to have missed the spectacle of the muffin growing. He had seen it several times, but he could still scarcely believe that Bairtlemead was able to grow muffins from the very earth itself, rather than bake them.

Using a handful of various spices, the druid would sprinkle the ingredients onto the earth inside a hollow carved into the wall of the home, which somewhat resembled a makeshift, crude oven. Then, after a few moments, the tops of the muffins would begin to sprout from the earth like large mushroom caps, and proceed to rapidly grow to full-size.

The scent of baking muffins would fill the room. Coupled with the other mingling scents of herbs, spices, and aromatic tea, Muffingrow’s home was truly a feast for the nose.

But it was Colin’s mouth and stomach that were reveling in enjoyment at the moment. His taste buds savored the delectable muffins and his stomach warmed

as it received a healthy dose of invigorating, flavorful tea.

The druid sat down at the table across from Colin, casually sipping at his own mug of tea.

“So, tell me, any news of interest outside the ‘wood since last you were here?”

“Not really,” Colin mumbled between mouthfuls.

“Come now, surely there must be something. You’ve been going to school for two fortnights now, you must be learning of good things, yes?”

Colin groaned. He didn’t want to think about school. “Math. History. Writing and grammar. Boring stuff.”

Bairtlemead frowned. “Boring? Perhaps some of it is. But it is necessary Colin. Especially if you are to learn more of Tanglewood, and of how to better focus your magical abilities. There is more inside you than *dru-cainnt*, I’m sure of it.”

Colin beamed at the prospect. But he was also confused. “How can my schoolwork out there help me here?”

“Oh, quite easily! What most of the deiney fail to see is that science is not necessarily a separate entity from magic, as the deiney have been taught to think. Long ago, there were some who were able to utilize both the powers of science and of fey magic. Such a person can be quite powerful.”

Colin was skeptical. “Really?” he asked.

“Oh yes! You have a great opportunity, you see. You are both deiney and fey, and if you were able to learn to effectively wield the magic of both, you too could grow

to be a powerful druid indeed. After all, the true magic lies within you. It merely needs to be shaped and molded. Learning all you can of the science of deiney and the magic of the fey can do this.”

“I think I understand. But school still seems boring.”

The old druid laughed. “Ha, I’m sure it is at times, and it will likely grow even more tiresome as you grow older, but nonetheless, you’ll be glad you know what you know. If you can understand the basic concepts of math and science, you can use it to produce wonderful results and discover amazing things! You’ll forget all about boring! Now, lets see if you can tell me why history is so important.”

Colin had been growing more intrigued, but his attention quickly began to falter again, as it often does when young boys are asked to talk about school.

“Well, it just seems as if we’re learning about dates and wars and explorers. I do like the explorer part of it though, because I’m like an explorer myself, aren’t I? I’ve been exploring Tanglewood with Ailfrid.”

“That is true! But what about the rest? What do you think would be the benefit of learning about wars and dates of important events?”

“Well, I guess we need to know about these things because it’s how we got to the world we live in today.”

Bairtlemead smiled wide. “Excellent! And by following past events like a pathway that leads us to the present, a smart person can see what worked, and what didn’t, what went right, what went wrong, and what may need to be done in the future. The world doesn’t just change all on its own, you see. We all have a hand

in shaping it. And by studying events in the past, we can best see how we can make our future a better one.”

“How is that magic?”

Bairtlemead tapped a finger to the side of his head. “It is the magic of foresight. The magic of visiting the past, and possibly predicting, and changing the future.”

“And war? How does war make anything better?”

“It doesn’t. War will always have consequences. And we must learn from them, just as we must learn from anything else.”

“I guess,” Colin said glumly. “We never get to learn about real magic, or about elves and sprites or druids. That’s the type of stuff I really want to learn more about.”

“Why Colin, you have the ‘wood to teach you everything you need to know about that! Experience is always the best teacher. Anyone can look into a book and read about something, but if you can experience it for yourself, then that knowledge will last you a lifetime.”

“So what about spelling and grammar? How is that magical?”

Bairtlemead smiled again. “Words, written and spoken, are very magical indeed. Words have power; the power to hurt, the power to heal, to make you laugh or cry, to instill confidence, or to spread fear. Words can be very powerful, but if used incorrectly or for the wrong purpose, they can also produce disastrous results.

“The written word is also very powerful magic. It can be used to teach us many things, but it can be used falsely as well. It can also be used to tell wonderful

stories, and someday, someone might be writing about your own adventures here in Tanglewood! We have a long history here in the ‘wood, and it must be kept, so that nothing need ever be lost or forgotten.”

“So if I learn spelling and grammar, maybe I can write about Tanglewood too!”

“You could, but for obvious reasons, Tanglewood is a secret best kept amongst the *sheehogue*. But were you to want to write about anything else, then yes, you must learn to do so properly. And if you can learn it well, then you will wield great magic!”

“Really? How?”

“Because writing is an art. It is a creative journey that begins in the mind, an impulse inspired by thoughts, pictures, feelings, and sounds. A writer takes those impulses and composes them into a format by which others can experience those same visions and ideas. A writer can transport you from your current surroundings to a mystical place of faraway legend. A writer can teach you about things you never knew before. Or a writer can lift one’s spirits toward the heavens and the stars, toward Alastar himself, and make someone else feel good and powerful. That, Colin, is great magic.”

“Wow! When you put it that way, school seems a lot different!”

“Indeed! But enough about school, yes? Time enough for that when you go back. You are here in the ‘wood now, and it’s getting late. I’m sure you’ll be wanting to get some rest. Ailfrid will be here in the morning, and then you’ll have all day to explore.”

Colin smiled, already anticipating another exciting weekend.

CHAPTER TWO

Morning brought the familiar call of the mourning dove, and the enticing scent of eggs and bacon sizzling away on a pan over the fire. His stomach already rumbling, Colin tossed the heavy woolen blankets aside and quickly leapt from his bed, running barefoot across the cool stone floor of the hut. Pulling aside the thick drape that separated the smaller chamber from the main room, he grinned wide.

It was not just the breakfast that had him so excited, however. It was also the sight of his good friend Ailfrid, who was already sitting at the large table, enjoying a thick slice of fresh-baked brown bread slathered with sweet apple butter.

“Ailfrid!”

The ferrish beamed, his purely silver eyes sparkling brightly. A broad smile revealed a mouthful of crumbs stuck in his teeth.

Colin laughed hard. “Gross!”

Ailfrid laughed too, sputtering crumbs across the table. This encouraged a frown from Bairtlemead, who had just turned away from the hearth oven to witness the spectacle. The druid's eyes were smiling, however, so the boys knew they were in no serious trouble.

"Morning, Colin," Doc Muffingrow said. "Sit, breakfast will be ready in a moment. Have some warm bread in the meantime."

Colin pulled a wooden chair away from the table and sat across from Ailfrid. He helped himself to the brown bread that resided in a large cloth-lined wicker basket. Next to the basket sat a jar of jam and a ceramic crock of apple butter, and the iron teakettle, no doubt full of steaming blackberry tea, the perfect thing to warm up the boys on a chilly fall morning.

"Colin, good to see you," Ailfrid said, after swallowing his mouthful.

"You too," replied Colin, as he spread a healthy amount of butter and jam across his bread.

"Cox has invited us to a feast this evening, to celebrate Sahwen. There'll be lots of treats!"

"Sounds great! Oh, but Chestnut Grove is so far from here. How would we get there in time, and how would I get back home in time tomorrow?"

"Don't worry about it," the ferrish replied. "Me and Bairtlemead have already figured out a solution to that little problem. Right, Bairtlemead?"

The druid remained silent, but smiled knowingly.

"Is it the muffins again?" Colin asked, remembering the muffins Bairtlemead had once fed to Ailfrid, Deidre

& Colin, which had magically enhanced their energy and increased their speed.

The druid shook his head. “No, and never mind about that now. Enjoy your breakfast.”

Doc Muffingrow set a plate each in front of Colin and Ailfrid, upon which sat a grand breakfast feast. There was a mound of scrambled eggs, light and fluffy and dusted with pepper and thyme, fresh sausages that practically melted on the tongue like a savory butter, half a tomato, browned at the edges from lying in the pan, and a few sautéed mushrooms thrown in as well.

There was also something called black pudding, which didn't resemble any sort of pudding Colin had ever seen. The small round slices were sizzled crisp on the surface, and soft and moist beneath. Competing for dominance on the plate along with the sausages was yet another delectable meat that tasted very much like bacon. Ailfrid called this *rashers*, and though it somewhat resembled thicker slices of bacon, it was not as fatty as what Colin's mother usually brought home from the supermarket. The taste, however, was just as salty-delicious, if not even more superior.

Colin had once asked Doc Muffingrow where all the fresh food came from. He knew the druid kept a large herb garden on the top of the riverbank, where various herbs, vegetables, and other plants were bathed by sunlight all day. But Bairtlemead owned no livestock, and Colin was certain that there were no farms nearby, and certainly no grocery store!

Bairtlemead had laughed at that, and explained that while the surrounding woods often provided him with

all the sustenance he required, he sometimes had fresh food delivered by elfin runners. He had also showed Colin a small chamber hollowed out of the rock face within the hut. Using his druidic magic, Bairtlemead had managed to form a small network of vents leading from the outside to this chamber, which enabled cool air to be channeled into the enclosure, keeping the food inside fresh for a time.

Additionally, the surrounding shelves and a cluttered pantry were always well stocked with all manner of foodstuffs and ingredients, herbs and spices, and today, a basket of eggs and a jug of milk. Often, the druid would also have various fruits, nuts and cheeses for the boys to snack on.

The boys feasted on their breakfast happily and quickly, while Doc Muffingrow sat at the end of the table, consuming his own morning meal a bit more leisurely.

“You wont take him too far today,” the druid said to Ailfrid.

“No, not too far. I though we might go as far as Fallen Tree.”

Bairtlemead shook his head. “Fallen Tree is too far, and too close to the Stump. It’s not safe during Sahwen.”

Ailfrid frowned, but the normally upstart ferrish held his tongue. He knew there would be no arguing with Doc Muffingrow.

Colin’s curiosity had already been aroused, however, and like most young boys, being told he couldn’t do

something of course made him want to march right out and do it.

“I can take care of myself, Bairtlemead. I escaped from the Below, remember?”

The druid cocked an eyebrow. “I do remember, and I also remember how you would have wound up right back there again had it not been for my intervention. The ‘wood holds much more than a few troublesome sprites, and some areas are not meant for young boys such as yourselves to be roaming about freely in. At least, not so close to Sahwen.”

“He’s right Colin,” Ailfrid said. “Another time.”

Colin frowned, silenced. He knew it wasn’t like the ferrish to concede so easily. But he would not press the issue further with Bairtlemead present. He decided instead that once he and Ailfrid set out into the ‘wood, he would try to persuade the ferrish to take him to Fallen Tree. He knew that Ailfrid enjoyed showing him new parts of the ‘wood just as much as Colin enjoyed seeing them.

Colin took special delight in hearing the stories that were attached to certain areas of Tanglewood, such as the story of Finn the Giant, and the haphazard destruction he had wrought with his mighty club, creating the area known as the Land of Dead Trees. He also liked the story of Root Path, and how Monohan the Druid had asked the trees to create the distinctive pathway through the ‘wood.

Colin hoped that one day, he would be a powerful druid as well, powerful enough that the trees would move for him if he asked.

The 'wood was full of stories of magic and strange creatures, and Colin had strong desires to hear of them all.

Shortly after breakfast, the boys returned to the nearby lake. Ailfrid then led Colin north along the moss-covered bank. They kept the sun-speckled water to their left for a short while, and then followed a leaf-strewn path that veered northeast, back into thicker woods.

Patches of clover grew thick along the ground, and gray-green ivy coiled their long tendrils around the trunks of the oaks, maples, elms and hawthorns. Purple thistles pushed their way through the bushes on either side of the path, with patches of small white flowers keeping them company. Fat bees circulated lazily amongst the flowers, but did not bother the boys.

Ailfrid hummed a tune as they walked, a quiet melody that accompanied the surrounding sounds of the forest.

Colin had never been to this part of the 'wood before. He marveled at how the nature in Tanglewood was all-consuming; a powerful, primeval presence that could never be ignored.

There was ample evidence of this as the birds overhead whistled a song of their own, lending further layers of melody to the enchanting song of the 'wood.

Suddenly feeling extremely impatient, Colin's curiosity was also an entity unable to be ignored any

longer. He decided now to ask Ailfrid about the area known as Fallen Tree, and the reason for Doc Muffingrow's implicit instructions not to go there.

"So what's the big deal about Fallen Tree during Sahwen?"

"Sahwen is an exciting time in Tanglewood," Ailfrid answered. "But it can be a dangerous time as well."

"Dangerous? How?"

"There are other gateways in Tanglewood than the one you came through. They lie deep in the heart of Tanglewood, and can only be passed through if you possess great magic, like Monohan the druid. They lead to places that are very old and very far away, full of wild magic and wilder fey."

"Wow! Can we go there?"

"Not on our own, but perhaps one day Bairtlemead will take us. Those gateways are hidden even from the eyes of many of the sheehogue here in the 'wood, for only a special few are allowed to use them. Anyway, those gateways aren't really the ones you need to worry about."

"There are others?"

"Yes. Once, there were many, some leading to great cities of sheehogue, living in vast forests or in huge underground caverns, but now most of these are forever shut. Over the centuries, the cities emptied, and the magic in the gateways was drained away, either on its own or because the druids and elves decided to close them, for whatever reasons they thought were good at the time. But there are certain times of the year that the magic returns to some of the gateways, despite the

efforts of those who try to keep them shut. Sahwen is one of those times.”

“How come?”

“During Sahwen, and in the days leading to it, the ‘wood is thick with old magic rising from the earth and leaking through the trees like a thick sap. Can you not sense it in the air?”

Colin concentrated, and realized for the first time that the air did have a certain quality to it he had not immediately noticed before.

Subtly laced within the myriad scents of the ‘wood were other flavors both unfamiliar yet seductive. Hiding beneath the gentle sound of the breeze was the tingling of bells, as though heard from far, far away. And if Colin tried to focus his eyes on one particular spot, he was able to discern bright motes of multi-colored lights softly floating through the air. The tiny lights remained just outside the edges of his vision, and disappeared when he turned toward them.

Indeed, the ‘wood was heavy with the presence of old magic.

“This magic seeps into everything,” Ailfrid continued, “including the old gateways. It alters the bindings and runes that keep them shut, and things from the other side find their way into the ‘wood. Things that normally don’t reside here. Some are friendly. Others are not.”

“So is there a gateway near Fallen Tree? Is that why we can’t go near there?”

“Not exactly. There is something else, and the old magic affects this as well. It’s not wise to be anywhere near it now.”

Ailfrid had finished talking, but Colin wanted to hear more.

“Well, what is it?”

Ailfrid shook his head. “It’s not wise to talk about it either.”

“Why?” Colin asked, stopping. He put his hands on his hips in a defiant stance. “What are you scared of?”

Colin had never directly challenged Ailfrid before now. The look on the ferrish’s face showed a hint of confusion, while his silver eyes flashed brighter. The ferrish, despite the fact that he was centuries-old, still possessed the heart of a boy, with the bravado to match.

“I’m not scared of anything in these woods!”

Colin crossed his arms. “Well neither am I.”

It was a lie, and they both knew it. But neither one wanted to back down before the other.

Ailfrid, normally equally as rambunctious as Colin, if not more, was always eager to proceed head first into adventure, especially now that he had a willing partner. But a warning from Doc Muffingrow was not something to be taken lightly, even by an untamed ferrish of the ‘wood. Recalling the druid’s words was enough to arouse Ailfrid’s common sense.

“I’m not scared,” he said, putting his own hands on his hips. “But I’m not stupid either. There are just some things you don’t do during Sahwen. And just because you can talk to a few trees doesn’t mean you can just go marching off wherever you please.”

Colin struggled with a few replies, some of which were not pleasant. But he managed to remain calm and settled on words less volatile.

“You were going to take me there until Bairtlemead said not to.”

“Yes, I was. But that was before Bairtlemead reminded me of what lies beyond Fallen Tree. I’m taking you someplace else instead. It’s a meeting ground of sorts.”

“Really? Are we meeting anybody?” The prospect of making even more *sheebogue* friends excited Colin, and was almost enough to dissuade his impulsiveness.

“Perhaps,” the ferrish answered. “The place is called *Three Stumps*, because of three large tree stumps, each as large as a table. You could lie down on one and still have lots of room.”

“What are we going to do there?”

“We’re going to have lunch. It’s also a good place to gather blackberries. And sometimes, if you sit there for a while, someone will come along to join you. The stumps can grow jealous of each other if one or two is occupied and the other isn’t. So they have a way of attracting visitors.”

“Weird.”

“Nope. That’s just the way of the ‘wood.’”

The boys continued along the path silently for a time. Colin still mulled over the idea of convincing the ferrish to lead him to Fallen Tree. He could not explain his unyielding compulsion to journey in that direction. Normally, he allowed Ailfrid or Doc Muffingrow to tell him of the ‘wood and lead him wherever they pleased.

Today, however, Colin's desire for adventure and exploration was a powerful beast that could not be tamed for long.

But the area called Three Stumps sounded rather intriguing as well, and so was the prospect of meeting more of the strange and wondrous inhabitants of the 'wood.

Ailfrid returned to humming his tune, and Colin attempted to join him, improvising. Ailfrid smiled in his direction, seeming pleased that Colin was adding his own bit of melody to the song.

In truth, Colin was doing it in an attempt to distract his own mind from continually returning to thoughts of Fallen Tree and the unmentioned curiosity that lay nearby.

Soon, the path forked, with one branch continuing north, and another heading east. The trees were much larger here, wider around the trunk and towering high overhead. Powerful elms draped heavy branches across each other, many of them still thick with leaves, and so the sunlight was not as penetrable in this older part of Tanglewood. Much of the surrounding undergrowth was obscured by shadow.

A rabbit or chipmunk occasionally revealed itself, stepping out onto the path to regard the two boys, and then scampering back into the safety of the thick bushes.

"This way, Colin," Ailfrid said, gesturing toward the east.

Colin paused at the fork, glancing toward the north. Shafts of sunlight rained down through scattered gaps

in the trees, causing the alternative path to the north to appear particularly inviting.

“Where does this path lead?” he asked the ferrish.

Ailfrid regarded Colin suspiciously, and frowned. “You know where it leads.”

Colin smiled. “Fallen Tree?”

“Yes. But we’re going this way instead.”

“How far is it? We can go this way for a little bit, can’t we?” Colin started quickly down the north path, not waiting for an answer from Ailfrid.

“Hey!” The ferrish caught up to Colin and matched his stride. “C’mon, we can’t.”

“Why not?” Colin asked, not stopping.

“Because, I told you before. Besides, Bairtlemead said so. He’ll be really angry.”

Colin considered that, and slowed his pace. The desire to continue down the path was an overwhelming urge that was increasingly difficult to put aside. In fact, even as he tried to stop his feet, he realized that they would not obey his commands. It was almost as if he were being pulled along the path against his will, toward some unseen voice that called to him.

Yes, he could *hear* it now. It was not in the air about him, but within his own mind. It had been a quiet whisper all throughout the morning, silently urging him closer. It had been extremely faint, and Colin had not even detected it before, though it had obviously been affecting him for some time.

Now, as he grew closer to whatever it was that called to him, it resonated more clearly within him. It closely resembled the voices of the trees, a language not of

words, but of feelings and emotions that Colin was at times able to understand and translate, such was the power of *dru-cainnt*. But this voice was slightly different. The tones were warped and strained, but possessed a particular strength and urgency that suddenly frightened Colin.

Curiosity and adventure-seeking aside, Colin would normally not have disobeyed the druid that had helped to protect and save his life in the past. He knew now that it was this voice in his mind that had slowly and quietly seized hold of him. It was a silent song that had persuaded the boy to seek out the source of its call, despite Ailfrid's continued insistence that they not go this way.

The voice, perhaps sensing Colin's newfound awareness, increased in intensity, and the effect was like invisible hands grabbing at Colin and pulling him farther long the path.

"Colin, stop!" The ferrish ran to catch up with his friend, and stepped in front of him.

Colin simply barreled past, nearly knocking Ailfrid to the ground.

"Ailfrid! Help!" Colin found himself struggling to speak. What had been a steady, distant rumbling in his head was an ocean of crashing waves now, and Colin wasn't even sure that his cry for help had managed to escape past his lips.

But the ferrish did hear, and he ran after Colin again, grabbing him by the straps of his backpack and spinning him around.

A bright flash of yellow sparks erupted in Colin's face, singeing the edges of his dark hair and reddening his cheeks with heat.

Colin, temporarily blinded as well as startled, cried out and covered his face with his hands.

The strange connection with the unseen voice was lost, snuffed out by the sudden shock of Ailfrid's magical attack.

"Colin, are you okay? I'm sorry, I had to do it. You were not yourself."

A few tears streamed from Colin's eyes, a reaction to the stinging sensation in his face. His eyelids were clenched shut, and he rubbed at them softly in an effort to coax them open again, but the burning pain had not yet fully subsided.

"Please Colin, tell me you're okay?"

Colin felt Ailfrid's arms grasping him by the shoulders, and he roughly shook them off.

"I'm okay," he said, but his wavering voice suggested he was still frightened.

He put his hands down and at last was able to open his eyes, furiously blinking away the tears. His vision was a bit blurry, but he was rapidly gaining focus again. His face was still hot, but he was altogether unharmed, save for a few strands of hair.

"What the bloody hell did you do to me?" he angrily asked the ferrish.

"I'm sorry," Ailfrid said, and his expression of concern truly showed that he meant the words. "I had to snap you out of it."

"Out of what?"

“Whatever trance you were in. You were heading down that path, and it seemed like nothing was going to stop you.”

Colin looked north, and suddenly the path seemed dark and cold, in stark contrast to the inviting scene that had beckoned Colin mere moments ago. The surrounding trees appeared menacing; long branches loomed overhead, ready to close their crooked fingers around Colin’s small form and pluck him from the ground.

Colin realized that his anger at Ailfrid was misplaced. The ferrish had only been trying to warn him this whole time, and indeed had been forced to use his magic to break the strange hold that had propelled Colin along the path, deeper into the foreboding woods.

Colin was frightened again. His body grew cold with the realization that something could have controlled him so easily, without him even being aware of it for a time.

“You’re right. I was in a trance. I couldn’t stop myself. Something was calling me the whole morning. Even as far back as Bairtlemead’s, it was calling, but I couldn’t really hear it yet. It made me *want* to go this way more than anything, no matter what you or Bairtlemead said.”

“I told you, when Sahwen approaches the magic of the ‘wood is warped. There are dangers. We musn’t go any farther.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t want to anymore.”

The two boys hurried back down the path toward the fork.

“There was a voice,” Colin said. “In my head, like when I talk to the trees. But this voice was different. It almost sounded like a tree, but I knew it wasn’t. I could almost understand words, and I definitely heard it saying my name. And it got stronger as I got closer to it. It was down that path.”

Ailfrid agreed. “Not a tree. Not exactly. I think I know what it was.”

“What was it? I need to know.”

Ailfrid was silent, considering it, and then decided there was no need to worry anymore about Colin’s curious nature. It was obvious his friend would not be continuing back down that path again anytime soon.

“A short while after passing beneath Fallen Tree, you’ll find Satyr Stump. It is where Fionn the satyr was cursed long ago. At any other time of year, we can cross by safely, but during this time of the season, we need to keep our distance.”

“How come? What happens at Satyr Stump during Sahwen?”

“Long ago, Fionn was the leader of a tribe of satyrs, powerful fey with the upper half of their bodies like a man, and the lower half has the legs of a goat.”

“Like a faun?”

“They are sometimes called that. Fionn and his tribe used to roam the woods in a beautiful glen beyond Fallen Tree, and mainly kept to themselves. Sometimes they came to one of the many great feasts to meet with Alastar and enjoy the merriment. They were also expert whistle and harp players, and the music they brought to

the feasts was always welcome, and always missed when they went back to their glen.”

The two arrived back at the fork and quickly hurried down the east path, striving to put a fair amount of distance between themselves and Satyr Stump.

“One day, a *deiney* woman found her way into the ‘wood. She was a young druidess, but her magic had not yet matured.”

“How did she get into the ‘wood?”

“Some say she had a Soul of the ‘Wood, like Monohan the Druid. Others say she had Blood of the Fey, like you. *Uirisg* were a bit more common back then.”

Ailfrid continued. “At one of the great feasts, Fionn met the druidess Grainne, and fell deeply in love with her, as he had never seen one of such beauty. He rallied his fellow satyrs and they played a song for Grainne, who seemed equally enchanted by the satyr chieftain. After the feast, they were often inseparable. Together, they spent many days in the glen sitting beneath a great willow tree, which Fionn believed to be the second most beautiful thing in the ‘wood. Life for them was bountiful for a time.”

“I have a feeling something bad happened.”

“It did. It was shortly after the time when the Lost Fey returned to the ‘wood. Fionn and Grainne were present outside the home of Alastar when it exploded. Along with all the other sheehogue who were there to witness it, they watched what had become of Alastar rise into the sky to settle among the stars. They saw the imprint of the Lost Fey scorched into the earth, tainting

the ‘wood. And whatever sinister magic infected the ‘wood that day had not left Fionn and Grainne untouched.”

Colin had never seen a satyr, though he had read about them at times in fantasy comics and books. He imagined they must be a wonderful but scary sight to behold.

“The first signs that something was not as it should be appeared not in Fionn or Grainne, but in the great willow tree, whose leaves had never been shed, not in hundreds of years. There was deep magic in that glen, and the tree was the heart of it. The satyr and the druidess both sat beneath the tree, gazing upon the waters of a babbling stream that trickled happily by. And then the first leaf fell.”

Colin gazed at the many trees they passed, most of whom had already shed a healthy amount of leaves, which littered the forest floor. He imagined the willow tree was a special tree indeed to stay fresh and full for so many years, and that something terrible must have been brewing for it to suddenly change.

“Fionn watched the first leaf fall with a mixture of emotions, for he knew that the falling leaf meant things were not right. The satyr leapt to his feet as more leaves began to fall. It was a strong omen, a warning of terrible things to come.”

“The tree was crying?”

“Exactly. It was not really its leaves it was shedding, but rather tears, for while it knew something was going to happen soon, it unfortunately had no way to communicate with Fionn other than this.”

“What did Grainne do?”

“The druidess had also come to know of the magic of the willow tree and of the significance of the falling leaves. The willow tree was shedding tears for them alone, and they both knew it. But at that moment, neither one knew why. Grainne and Fionn stared at each other, with seeds of doubt in their minds and in their hearts that had never been there before.”

As Colin and Ailfrid continued down the path, the surrounding trees seemed to dip their branches, as though carrying a heavy burden. The falling leaves seemed to increase in frequency, steadily spiraling to the forest floor with each successive breeze that shook them from their branches.

Colin did not need to use the *dru-cainnt* to understand that the trees were listening to the sad story and crying tears of their own.

“It was not long before the willow tree’s mysterious omen came to light. It seemed that over time, Grainne had fallen in love with another, and her feelings for Fionn had dwindled. It had been discovered one night, as Fionn lurked in the shadows, that Grainne had been spending time with Diarmuid, one of Fionn’s best hunters and also his closest friend. The satyr chieftain watched them, night after night, and listened to the lies and deceptions of both of them by day. The treachery of two he had cared about so much began to drive him mad.”

“What did he do?” Colin asked. He already suspected that the continuation of Ailfrid’s story would not be a pleasant one resulting in a happy ending.

“Fionn was once the purest of heart, as much as the glen he lived in was beautiful. But he had begun to change, and the glen had taken notice of this over time. The leaves on the trees were no longer as green, the birds did not sing as loudly as they used to, and the willow tree was almost bare.

“Some part of Fionn must have tried to overcome his incredibly strong emotions of anger, distrust, and resentment, but it was too late. The satyr had pretended to be ignorant of Diarmuid and Grainne’s trysts for some time, until his wounded heart could bear no more. One night, while still feigning friendship, Fionn went with Diarmuid into the forest on a hunt. They soon faced a large wild boar.

“Normally, Fionn and Diarmuid fought well together, but on this night, the satyr chieftain purposely held back, allowing the boar to wound Diarmuid terribly. Only then did he step in and help finish off the boar.”

“But it was too late, wasn’t it?” Colin asked.

“It might not have been. Diarmuid was very badly wounded, and was slowly dying, but Fionn held a flask. It was filled with water taken from a sacred stream in the glen, which possessed certain healing qualities. Diarmuid lay on the ground, reaching for the flask, but Fionn backed away, not allowing his friend one sip of the water. He waited silently, watching Diarmuid die. In his last moments, Diarmuid understood that it was his own treachery at fault for his demise, and he forgave Fionn for his part in it.”

“Did Fionn kill Grainne as well?”

“No. If he had intended to, he never got the chance. When Fionn returned from the hunt alone, Grainne must have figured out what had happened. She was not as forgiving as Diarmuid had been.”

“She is the one who cursed him?”

“Yes. She had grown more powerful during her time in the ‘wood. The glen she resided in with Fionn had been like a wellspring of magic, of which she had drunk deep. She vowed to avenge Diarmuid and destroy Fionn, and all those who remained loyal to him. Some of the satyrs sought to stop her, but they underestimated her power. She killed and wounded many, and sent the rest scattering into the ‘wood. Even Fionn was no longer a match for her, as he possessed no magic strong enough to counter her fury.

“But he was quick and cunning, and he sought to escape into the ‘wood with what remained of his tribe. Grainne pursued him throughout the night, and finally, with the aid of her magic, she tracked him down. Fionn thought his last moments were at hand, but Grainne then decided that rather than kill her former lover, she would curse him instead. She cast a spell, rooting him to the very spot where he stood. Her magic had become twisted and foul to match her emotions, but it was still of the earth and the ‘wood, and so her curse reflected that. She turned Fionn into a thing of the ‘wood, a living tree stump. His mind is thusly forever tormented while his body is transformed, as still and solid as a tree, and as rough as its bark.”

Colin shuddered at the prospect.

“He isn’t truly dead, but not really alive either. Only during Sahwen is Fionn able to break the bonds of his curse and roam free, and it is best to avoid him. He is not a happy sort.”

“And what about Grainne. What became of her?”

“She is known only as the Grey Lady now, and still resides in the glen, only it has changed to match her corrupted spirit. The waters of the streams have turned brackish, the trees are old and withered, and the once luxurious meadow is now a festering bog, perilous to those who don’t know the paths. The Grey Lady still sits under the same willow tree, but you’d not recognize it as it once was.”

The boys continued on in silence, and Colin wondered at the powerful voice in his mind that had been able to persuade him so effortlessly to heed its call. He understood now why the voice had been similar to that of the trees, and why he alone had been able to hear it calling.

Fionn, cursed as a living, yet unmoving tree stump, had been able to communicate with Colin due to the boy’s ability of *dru-cainnt*.

For the first time, Colin thought that having magic in his blood might not be such a good thing after all. Had he been a normal boy, Fionn would not have been able to penetrate his mind. Instead, the satyr had been able to sense Colin’s approach and subjugate the boy to his will using the *dru-cainnt*, and Colin had been powerless to resist. If it hadn’t been for Ailfrid...

Who knows what the cursed satyr had planned to do once he had drawn Colin close?

Colin shuddered again, but kept his worries to himself. He tried to lose himself in his surroundings in an effort to ward off thoughts of the terrifying moment. The beauty of the 'wood was usually becalming, but now the trees just served as an ominous reminder that his mind was open to creatures that were all too eager to prey upon him. First it had been the sprites, which had enslaved Colin's spirit in song, and now Fionn the satyr had temporarily taken hold of him as well.

Ailfrid and Bairtlemead had not been exaggerating. Sahwen was a dangerous time to be in the 'wood. Colin was beginning to think he should leave, and come back only when the season had passed and it was safer for him to wander the pathways alone.

He did not mention this to Ailfrid, however, as he knew the ferrish would be dismayed if Colin chose not to return to Tanglewood for some time. He instead decided he would broach the subject with Doc Muffingrow upon his return to the druid's home. Until then, Colin would trust that Ailfrid would be there to steer him away from any more dark paths, or save him from the strong, magical call of the cursed Fionn.