

HEARTWOOD

Trickster's Game # 1



BARBARA CAMPBELL

DAW BOOKS, INC.
DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, FOUNDER

375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014

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“LORD OF THE OAK. LORD OF THE HOLLY. WE STAND BEFORE YOU. Lords of the First Forest, we come to witness.”

The air trembled. A shiver ran down Struath’s spine as the energy flowed around him and through him, through all of the watchers—a circle of living power surrounding the Tree. A shudder rippled through the massive trunk. The sweeping boughs of the Holly shook as the Lord of the Waning Year offered the challenge. The Oak rattled its spindly branches, accepting.

Then the Holly attacked. The finger-length spikes of its leaves carved long gouges in the Oak trunk. Struath sang with the others. Each day since Midsummer, the Oak-Lord’s strength had dwindled, and with it the strength of the sun. Tonight, his power was at its lowest ebb, yet somehow the Lord of the Waxing Year must prevail.

A great bulge ran up the trunk of the Tree. Twigs burst out of the Oak’s naked limbs. They grew thick and strong, swelling with power. The Oak lashed the Holly, the sharp retort of cracking branches punctuating the singing. Green boughs sagged. Red berries, large as fists, rained down.

The Holly’s limbs shriveled, retreating before the burgeoning power of the Oak. Even as relief surged through him, Struath heard a high-pitched whine. The chanting faltered.

The Oak split with a horrifying shriek of rending wood. Shards of wood, longer than any spear, catapulted through the air. Men and women fled screaming, trampling those in their path. Struath stood frozen as one of the flying spears shattered a man’s head. Another impaled a woman on a bird where her body hung, twitching.

The Tree shrieked again. Struath raised his head as the Oak shuddered and ripped away from the trunk of the Tree. Blackness filled the jagged scar. In the blackness, stars red as blood gleamed with an unholy light as they swirled, slowly coalescing into a shape. A hand, Struath realized. An outstretched hand, the fingers curling and uncurling as if reaching for him. . . .

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PART ONE



*Winter has come.
It walks the leafless forest and the frost-rimed fields.
It spreads its mantle of snow on the sleeping earth.
It breathes on the waters and locks them in silence.
It whistles on the hilltops, piercing the air with its
bitter song.
It devours the sun with fangs of icicles.
It clasps my hand with frozen fingers and chuckles
as I shiver.
Winter has come, wearing a crown of holly leaves.
Wintersong*

Chapter 1



FEAR IS THE ENEMY.

Careful not to awaken his brother, Darak flung his mantle over his shoulders and eased aside the bearskin that hung across the doorway. As cold as their hut had been, the frigid air outside stole his breath. Stifling a cough, he swiped his watering eyes with the back of his hand.

Scudding clouds hid the face of the moon goddess, but to the north, pale stars flickered, their light too faint to show more than the smudged shapes of the nearest huts. Old Sim's snores offered a droning counterpoint to the whimper of a babe, quickly muffled as it found its mother's breast in the darkness.

Darak quelled the unexpected rush of resentment the ordinary sounds evoked. He had only himself to blame. When Tinnean declared his intention of becoming the Tree-Father's apprentice, he had dismissed it as a whim. After the ceremony took place at Midsummer, he had convinced himself that his impulsive brother would soon tire of the rigorous training. When his brother remained resolute, he had argued with him. Then came the series of calamities that had devastated the tribe, driving his concerns about Tinnean's future from his mind. Autumn found his brother spending every evening with the Tree-Father, leaving him to sit by the fire pit, fighting the emptiness of their hut and the bitterness of his memories. Since then, he had clung to the belief that his brother would realize his error, that like all the men in their line, he would follow the hunter's path.

Foolishly, he had thought time was his ally. Now he knew better.

Control the fear.

He had learned to banish the old fears that stalked his dreams as soon as he awoke. This new fear was harder to conquer. During the day, he held it at bay by driving his mind and body hard, but during the long winter nights, it crept close, a stealthy predator seeking his most vulnerable points. Sleep offered no escape. Better to remain awake, alert, prepared for the inevitable attack.

He paced back and forth, his footsteps crunching too loudly in the hard-packed snow. He would not lose Tinnean. He would not.

Control yourself.

Stillness should come easily to a hunter, yet even when he forced himself to lean against the wall of the hut, his hands kept clenching and unclenching. Silently, he rehearsed the words again. Sling and spear, bow and arrow—those he had mastered, but if he was going to stop Tinnean from ruining his life, words were his only weapons.

He was still trying to find the right ones when he sensed movement. He straightened as the bearskin fell back into place. Of course, Tinnean had come out without his mantle. Darak shrugged off his and wrapped it around his brother.

"I couldn't sleep either," Tinnean said.

Darkness masked his brother's expression. Was that tiny hitch in his voice proof that Tinnean had

changed his mind or was he simply nervous about the morrow's ceremony? Darak knew well how doubt could assail a man at night. He would never wish Tinnean to suffer, but it was only one night after all, and surely worth a little pain to make the right choice. He took a deep breath, readying himself to utter the words he had chosen, the words that would convince Tinnean to abandon his foolhardy path.

Before he could speak, Tinnean grabbed his arm. Taut as a drawn bowstring, Darak searched the village for an enemy.

A sliver of white light pierced the sky. Tinnean's fingers fumbled for his, just as they had when he'd first glimpsed the Northern Dancers as a child. *He's still a child*, Darak thought. *And he still needs me.*

The streamer of light writhed like a snake impaled upon a spear, then exploded into a translucent veil of green and white that filled the northern horizon. The hairs on Darak's neck and arms stood upright as fiery bolts of light shot through the night sky. Beside him, Tinnean's voice shook as he whispered the prayers of protection. The messengers of the gods could herald good as well as evil, but always the appearance of the Northern Dancers foretold change.

The bolts of light grew soft and fluid, curling around each other, twisting into huge, glowing circles as they wove the wild pattern of the dance. Tremulous fingers sprouted from the bottom of the veil and groped earthward, the innocent rose darkening to stain Tinnean's upturned face blood red.

Darak reached for the bag of charms at his neck before he remembered that he no longer wore them. Quickly, he flicked his forefinger against his thumb three times. After that, he could only wait; the dance could last until dawn lightened the sky.

Instead, between one breath and the next, the sky flames simply vanished. Darak blinked, his eyes adjusting to the sudden darkness. Perhaps the gods listened to Tinnean's prayers; in the moons since Midsummer, they had never answered his.

He was still staring skyward when Tinnean tugged his hand free.

"I must go to the Tree-Father."

Before he could stop him, Tinnean raced off. Once, his brother would have looked to him for answers; these days, he was always running to Struath.

Long after Tinnean's figure had disappeared, Darak stared into the darkness. Then, with a muttered curse, he flung back the bearskin. Why ask the shaman to explain the signs? Even an ordinary man knew they foretold disaster.



When the tribe gathered at dawn for the first of the daylong rites, Darak observed the Tree-Father closely. If Tinnean's report had unsettled Struath, he hid it well. His face was as calm as ever, his voice steady as he led the tribe in the chant to honor the dead. Tinnean's shook, though; so did his hands, the knuckles white as he clenched the woven reed basket containing the bones of those who had died since the harvest. Their bodies had lain on stone platforms in the Death Hut for three moon allowing time and scavengers to eat away the flesh. The priests had gathered the bones at the dark of the moon and scoured them clean in preparation for today's interment.

At least they would receive a proper rite. The bodies of those who had died in the plague—forty-three men, women, and children—had been burned and their bones hastily buried after Struath had

discovered dead crows and ravens littering the ground around the Death Hut. Even after death, the plague continued its ravages.

Darak realized he was stroking the pockmarks on his cheek and let his hand fall to his side. Frowning, he watched the Tree-Father and Grain-Mother as they walked sunwise around the circle of worshipers. Yeorna's unbound hair rippled like ripe barley in the wind, the only bit of brightness of this gray morning. Gortin and Lisula followed, their faces solemn. Gortin's seemed gloomier than usual; Darak wondered if he was smarting at his failure to be elevated to Tree-Brother. After the plague took Cronig, the entire tribe expected Gortin to take his place, but Struath had announced on Tinnean's initiation.

Today.

Darak's voice faltered. Tinnean shot him a quick glance as he passed, his brother's clear tenor ringing out all the louder to make up for his momentary lapse.

It was all happening too quickly. Tinnean had only begun his apprenticeship at Midsummer and today he would become Struath's initiate. So many changes in their lives these last six moons—and all of them bad.

Struath thumped his blackthorn staff on the snow-custed ground and Nionik led the white bullock forward. Darak amended his previous thought; Nionik's election as Oak-Chief was the only good thing to come from the disasters that had befallen the tribe. Chosen in haste after the plague, he well deserved the three eagle feathers braided in his hair. He had seen the tribe through the hailstorm that had leveled the barley and the foot rot that had carried off half the sheep in their small flock.

Bel's golden face peeped through the clouds. A relieved sigh eased its way around the circle at the sun god's appearance and more than one face turned skyward, smiling at the good omen. His kinsfolk were still smiling when the bullock stumbled.

Several people gasped. Fingers moved in covert signs of protection. Even Struath frowned slightly as he nodded to the chief. Nionik took a firmer grip on the bullock's nettle-braid halter. He passed the lead rope to Gortin who yanked it hard, pulling the beast's head back to expose the muscular throat. Struath lifted his bronze dagger high.

"That its blood may feed our dead. That its flesh may feed the living. That its spirit may strengthen the Oak-Lord in tonight's battle." With the expertise of many years, Struath plunged the dagger into the bullock's throat.

The animal staggered to its knees and collapsed, its lifeblood spurting into the basin held by the Grain-Mother. Lisula knelt to catch the last of the offering in the ceremonial cup of polished black stone. Their ancestors had carried it with them when they fled north to escape a horde of invaders. Ten generations of their bones lay in the tribal cairns; only the cup remained, mute testament to their flight.

Before they left the village for the rite at the heart-oak, Struath would remove the heart, lungs, liver, and genitals from the bullock. Yeorna would sew each into a piece of the animal's hide. Struath would carry the heart into the First Forest and offer it to the Oak-Lord. On the morrow, after the tribe returned from the forest, the tender liver would be cast into the lake to thank the goddess Lacha for sharing her bounty. The lungs would be burned, carrying the bullock's breath to the gods of lightning and thunder. The genitals would be buried in the fields to ensure Halam's blessing of fertility for the crops.

Once, Darak had found comfort in these rites, handed down from one generation to the next since the first Tree-Father had sacrificed to the gods. Now, he stared dully at the cooling carcass of the bullock, wondering if the gods even noticed their piety.

A thread of steam rose into the air as Lisula handed the cup to Struath. The shaman proffered the cup to the four directions before raising it to his lips. Yeorna drank next, then Gortin, and finally Lisula who held the cup for Tinnean. Darak saw his lips move in a quick prayer before he lowered his head to drink. That unruly lock of hair fell across his forehead. As he raised his head, Lisula brushed it back, smiling. The gesture clearly surprised Tinnean, but after a moment, he smiled back, ducking his head shyly.

Darak discovered answering smiles on the faces of his kinfolk and found himself recalling the time a bee had stung Tinnean on the lip. Their mam claimed his smile was so sweet, the poor insect had confused his mouth with its honeycomb.

Darak's smile faded. He had gifts, too: the ability to walk silently through a forest, to face a charging boar, to drop a deer with a single arrow. His tribe respected him for those gifts. But had any face ever lit up at the mere sight of him? Only Tinnean's, he realized. And that was long ago.



He marched with the others to the cairn. Watched with the others while Struath ducked into the dark entrance of the barrow, carrying the basket of bones. Sang with the others when he emerged again, proclaiming that those who had gone before had cried out a welcome to their blood-kin. Habu impelled him to pick up a stone and lay it atop the cairn in memory of his dead. A few women wiped their eyes. Tinnean wept openly, apparently unashamed of the tears streaking his cheeks. The only tears in Darak's eyes came from the gusting wind off the lake. He had no tears left to shed for the dead; he hadn't even been able to weep for the dying.

Bel fought a losing battle against the thickening clouds as they marched back to the village for the ritual relighting of fire. While Struath struggled to call forth a spark from his ceremonial firestick, Darak struggled with the words he would say to Tinnean. The speech he had prepared would not suffice, not with the power of today's rite still fresh in his brother's mind and the anticipation of his initiation beckoning. He needed to find new words, better ones. And he had to find them quickly.

Here and there, children blew on numbed fingers and stamped their feet, subsiding into stillness again at a parent's sharp look or pinch. When a spark stubbornly refused to catch, even the adults stirred restively, chafing chapped hands against tunics or clasping them under their woolen mantles. Darak curled and uncurled his toes inside his fur-lined shoes in a vain effort to take away the ache from the cold. He could only imagine the pain Struath must feel, crouched in the snow, forcing fingers gnarled with age and the joint-ill to spin the firestick again and again. He felt a reluctant admiration for the old man whose expression remained impassive.

Finally, a spark flickered and grew strong, drawing a victorious whoop from Red Dugan, quickly stifled when Struath turned that single blue eye on him. Struath and Yeorna lit their torches from the sacred fire. One by one, the head of each household lit a torch from theirs. As Darak dipped his torch toward Struath, the Tree-Father's eye bored into him. Admiration gave way to animosity. He would not let Struath take his brother, no matter what curse the Tree-Father flung at him. Surreptitiously, he flicked his forefinger against his thumb; no sense ill-wishing himself.

The crowd quickly dispersed, each family eager to get out of the wind and relight the household fire. Tinnean lingered beside Struath. Darak waited, his gaze drawn to Krali and Griane. Krali's long gray hair masked her face, but her shoulders shook in silent sobs. Today, she had watched Struath

carry her father's bones into the barrow, but surely she was remembering all the others she had lost—her mother to the blood-cough, both sons to the plague, and the niece who was a daughter to her in a way, but the birthing.

Darak took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He would not think of Maili now.

Griane clasped her aunt's hand. Although her eyes were dry, she was gnawing her upper lip, a sure sign of distress. Their eyes met. Her chilly stare commanded him to do something, say something, but what words could possibly assuage Krali's grief? Griane had grown up in Krali's hut. She called her "Mam." She was assistant to the tribe's healer. If she couldn't comfort poor Krali, how could he?

As he hesitated, Tinnean broke away from Struath and approached the two women. He touched Krali's shoulder gently. When she turned to look at him, he opened his arms. With a soft cry, she leaned into his embrace. His arms came around her, hugging her hard. His lips moved as he whispered something. When Krali straightened, tears still stained her lined face, but she managed a smile as she touched Tinnean's cheek. The smile vanished as Red Dugan approached.

"Stop your sniveling, woman. You're making a spectacle of yourself."

Griane's head snapped up. "You're a fine one to talk, Uncle Dugan. Drunk before midday."

Darak stifled a curse. She should know better than to taunt him when he had been drinking. Without waiting for Dugan's inevitable bellow, he started forward. His shout forestalled the blow, but it was Tinnean who stepped between Griane and her uncle.

"Enough. Please. This day is sacred to the Oak. Would you dishonor his spirit—and those of our ancestors—by quarreling?"

From their truculent expressions, it was clear that both Griane and Dugan were prepared to do just that. Tinnean stared from one to the other. Dugan unclenched his fist. Griane whirled away so abruptly that her long braid slapped her uncle across the chest. Dugan muttered something under his breath, but contented himself with shoving Krali toward their hut.

A great puff of steam filled the air as Tinnean let out his breath. Before Darak could speak, Struath strode forward.

"Forgive me, Tree-Father. I know it was not my place to speak, but . . ."

Struath shook his head, smiling. "It is the duty of every priest to guide his people. You did well, Tinnean."

As Tinnean stammered his thanks, Struath's gaze met Darak's and his gentle smile shifted into one of satisfaction. Darak spun away, narrowly avoiding a collision with Sim. Quickly righting his flaming torch, he seized the Memory-Keeper's arm to steady him. The old man clung to him, wincing, and Darak eased his grip.

"You've a strong hand, Hunter."

"And you're too silent by half, Memory-Keeper."

Four yellowed teeth flashed beneath the long white mustache. "I was a hunter, too, once. Before I found my true path. As Tinnean has."

Darak glanced over his shoulder to find Tinnean staring worshipfully at Struath. "Paths can change."

"For some men." Sim's rheumy blue eyes regarded him steadily. Darak waited, trying to curb his impatience. Perhaps Sim sensed it, for he chuckled. The chuckle turned into a wheezing cough. Darak pounded him on the back until the old man raised a protesting hand. "Some paths change," Sim managed between gasps. "Some are set. Didn't the blackbird sing to him on his vision quest?"

Darak scowled. "And didn't an eagle scream at Jurl?"

"Any creature with sense would scream at Jurl." Sim chuckled again and hawked a gob of phlegm.

onto the snow.

~~“A bird came to them both, aye. But Jurk was no more destined to be a priest than Tinnean.”~~

“Let him go, Darak.”

“He’s a boy. He doesn’t know what—”

“Let him go. Or you’ll lose him.”

Darak offered Sim a stiff bow. “With respect, Memory-Keeper, I think I’m a better judge of the than you.”

With a final glance at Tinnean, he strode back to their hut. Crouching beside the fire pit, he touched his torch to the stack of peat and dried dung. The smoke burned his eyes and he turned away coughing, to seize a handful of dead twigs.

Let him go or you’ll lose him.

With a quick, savage gesture he broke the twigs in half. The last thing he needed today was Old Sim and his homilies. He took several deep breaths, letting each out slowly. Twig by twig, he fed the fire, keeping each movement small and controlled. By the time the spark had grown to a flame, he was calm again.

Sim meant well, of course. And he could forgive the old man’s meddling, for he had grown up on the Memory-Keeper’s tales, had listened to that reedy voice intoning the ancient legends at every ritual. His youngest son shared the title now, but it was Old Sim who held the tribe’s heart—and its awe. Who among them had seen sixty summers? Not even Mother Netal and she was as ancient as Eagle Mount. Sim looked like a good breeze would topple him, but the stringy old man had outlived all his children save Sanok. Still, Darak wished he’d stick to the familiar legends and leave off interfering with matters he could not understand.

A draft at his back announced Tinnean’s arrival. Without looking up, Darak said, “Close the bearskin before we freeze.”

Pale sunlight leaked through the smoke hole in the roof and the chinks in the turf and stone walls, but neither sunlight nor fire could dispel the cold. Darak pulled his mantle closer, scraped the remainder of yesterday’s porridge into two bowls, and held one out to Tinnean.

“We cannot eat until after the battle, Darak. You know that.”

Of course he did. He’d been distracted by thoughts of Old Sim and his hands had moved without thinking. Thankful that drink was not forbidden, he reached for the jug of brogac, sighing as the fiery liquor settled in his belly.

Tinnean’s frown deepened, but he merely turned away and pulled off his dusky woolen robe. Beneath it, he wore the tunic their mam had made him. She had scraped and sewed the doeskin herself, presenting it to Tinnean when he had completed his vision quest and been accepted into the tribe as a man. He peeled it off now, shivering. Skinny as a stick, pale skin pebbled with cold, he looked about as manly as a newborn calf.

Darak lowered the jug as his brother crouched beside the stone basin that held their water and broke the ice with his fist. Shivering, Tinnean splashed water on his shoulders, then bent to pick up the chunk of wool-fat soap.

“You must have washed before.”

“I cleansed myself with Gortin and Struath.” Tinnean glanced at him, then looked away. “I meant to come back, Darak. I wanted to talk to you about . . . about what we saw. But—”

“It doesn’t matter.” He’d lain awake the rest of the night, waiting for his brother, but that was unimportant now. “Why wash again?”

“I want to be clean. Before . . . the ceremony.” Again, that half-fearful look, the inadvertent flinch.

As if he thought I'd strike him.

With an effort, he kept his voice light. "Well, don't scrub so hard. You'll wear your skin off."

The sudden smile made his breath catch in his throat. He tried to remember the last time his words had brought a smile to his brother's face. Tinnean shot him another sidelong glance, this one mischievous. He whistled, scrubbing his body harder.

"Fine, then. Don't blame me if you catch your death of cold."

"Fine, then. I won't." Tinnean's smile became a grin.

Darak grinned back at him. "Impudent pup."

"Old woman."

Darak flung a stale oatcake at his brother. Tinnean ducked and hurled the soap across the fire pit. Darak caught it one-handed and tossed it back, glimpsing downy fuzz under Tinnean's arm as he reached up to snatch the soap out of the air.

"You throw like a girl," Darak said.

"You drink too much."

"I do not." He took another long pull from the jug. "What else is there to do at Midwinter?"

"Pray."

"The gods don't hear my prayers."

"The Forest-Lord does. Else you wouldn't be the best hunter in the tribe."

"If the gods heard my prayers, you wouldn't be leaving."

Tinnean took a deep breath. "It's what I've always wanted, Darak."

"Two summers ago, you wanted to be a hunter."

"I was a child then."

"You're still a child."

"I am fourteen. Almost."

"At fourteen—almost—you should be thinking about girls, not gods."

"I do think about girls." Tinnean ducked his head. "Sometimes. At night."

Darak frowned. "You're too young to be thinking about girls. And little good it'll do you as a priest."

"Priests are not forbidden the . . . pleasures of the flesh." Despite his solemn voice, Tinnean's beardless cheeks flushed pink.

"But they are forbidden to marry. And if you die without children, our family name dies with you."

"You might marry again."

Darak slowly lowered the jug.

"I know it's been scarcely five moons . . ."

"Leave it, Tinnean."

"I grieve for Maili, too. And for Mam. For all those who—"

"I said leave it."

Two small creases appeared between Tinnean's brows, but he just threw handfuls of water across his soap-streaked chest. Darak frowned at the jug dangling from his forefinger. The mood had turned dark, the atmosphere in the hut charged with tension again.

"Will you hand me my mantle, Darak?"

Darak rose and pulled off his own. Hunching to keep from knocking his head on the curving roof stones, he dried Tinnean briskly, ignoring his brother's look of surprise. A drop of water stole down Tinnean's cheek. Darak wiped it away with his thumb, the simple gesture bringing that sweet smile to his brother's face.

Encouraged by its reappearance, Darak said, "All I'm asking is that you wait a bit. Till you're sure the smile died. "I am sure."

Tinnean slipped on his tunic again, then spread his woolen mantle across his bed of skins and laid out the ritual garb: white woolen undertunic and leggings, braided leather belt, and the brown woolen robe of the initiate. Before sunset, he would stand with his tribe before the heart-oak, wearing the robe for the first time. He would be blessed by Struath and formally acknowledged as his initiate. And he would never again live in the hut of his birth.

Tinnean smoothed the folds of the robe, the gesture so loving that Darak looked away. This was his last chance. He had to say something. But all he could do was stand there, fists digging into the dark folds of his mantle, as Tinnean added his few personal belongings to the pile of clothes: his bag of charms, his flint dagger, his flute.

Tinnean gathered the ends of the mantle in his fist. "I must go, Darak. I can't keep the Tree-Father waiting."

He'd carved the flute for Tinnean from the bone of a crane's leg. He'd taught him to play it. Struath had sat here, listening to the music, smiling at Tinnean's gift. Now the shaman was stealing him.

"It's not like I'm leaving forever. I'll sleep in the priests' hut, but I'll see you every day. Every day I promise." Tinnean's blue eyes were soft now and pleading. "Can't you be a little bit happy for me?"

Darak tossed the mantle aside and placed his hands on Tinnean's shoulders. "Give this up. Then you will be happy."

He remained utterly still, as if his brother were a deer he was stalking. Tinnean's eyes searched his face for a long moment. When his shoulders slumped, Darak's heart slammed into his chest. He had his brother back. Maybe the gods heard his prayers, after all.

He was still smiling when Tinnean said, "Even if I gave this up, you wouldn't be happy. I'm sorry, Darak." Tinnean stood on tiptoe to press a light kiss on his forehead. "May the Oak-Lord be with you."

Darak shook his head, the unspoken words of the blessing like ashes in his mouth. In the end, Tinnean completed the blessing himself. "And may his spirit fill you with power, with light, and with peace on this Midwinter night."

Tinnean's lips brushed each cheek. He smelled of soap and wool; a hint of peat smoke lingered in his hair. Darak's hands tightened on his shoulders, but he couldn't bring himself to look into his brother's face. Instead, he stared at the rushes, silently willing Tinnean to stay.

With unwonted firmness, Tinnean removed the restraining hands and slipped out of his grasp. Darak only looked up when he heard the shouted greetings from the men carving up the carcass of the bullock. Jurl's bellow rose above the others, hailing his brother as "our new little priest."

Darak picked up the jug of brogac. His brother was the last of his family and the gods had taken him, as surely as they had taken his mother and his wife. He hadn't been able to prevent that, but he damned if he would sing their praises. He would march into the forest with the rest of the tribe, but he would offer no gift to the heart-oak. Let the others sing the night away after the priests crossed into the First Forest to witness the battle of the Tree-Lords. Let them shout joyous greetings when Struath returned at dawn to proclaim that the Oak had defeated the Holly.

This year, his voice would remain silent. As silent as the gods who had turned their backs on him.

Chapter 2



STRUATH'S KNEES ACHED. Piety, he reflected, did as little to ease the miseries of old age as the three layers of furs upon which he knelt. He leaned forward and threw another handful of herbs on the fire, quelling the sigh of relief that the brief change in position offered. As he settled back, Tinnean's stomach growled. The boy shot him a quick, guilty look and Struath lowered his head to hide his smile. Next to him, he heard Gortin sigh and his smile changed to a frown.

Perhaps he should have elevated Gortin to Tree-Brother. His initiate was dutiful and devout. It was not his fault that he was also . . . dull. Struath appended a silent prayer of forgiveness to that thought. But to name Gortin Tree-Brother would give his tacit consent for Gortin to follow him as Tree-Father and that honor must go to the boy who knelt on his left.

Five more winters. Maker, grant me that much time to make him ready.

Others had come into their power young. He had been barely twenty summers when he had assumed the title of Tree-Father. Yeorna had risen from initiate to Grain-Mother within one turning of the year. Of course, Muina had to step down when her moon-blood ceased to flow and Aru had died in the plague, but difficult times bred change.

Besides, Tinnean was special; he'd known that even before the boy had returned from his vision quest. He had only to sit before the fire and stare into the flames to fall into the trance state. His nature made him easy to love—and a priest who was loved by his people would be followed without question. He could be impulsive, allowing the beauty of a summer morning to lure him into the forest when he should be honing his skills, but he was learning to curb that aspect of his nature. A few moons ago, he would have aroused the whole tribe when he saw the sky-flames. Last night, Tinnean had come to him.

Struath shifted uncomfortably on the furs. He had withheld the terrible omens from the rest of the tribe, even from the Grain-Mother. Gortin knew, of course. His initiate shared his hut and had heard Tinnean's story, but both had accepted his explanation: the sky-flames represented the red of the Holly-Lord's berries and their sudden disappearance proved the Oak-Lord would triumph in tonight's battle. He could trust Gortin and Tinnean. He'd been less confident about Darak, but Tinnean had assured him that Darak would say nothing.

The boy's face had clouded then, as it always did when his brother's name intruded on their conversations. It infuriated Struath that Darak should steal the joy of this day. Any other man would be proud of the honor shown his brother. And any other man would recognize how important Tinnean's pure faith was to the well-being of the tribe—especially now.

After all his tribe had suffered, he had taken extra precautions to ensure the gods' blessing for the Midwinter rites. He had fasted for the requisite three days. Risen before dawn to cleanse his body with ice-cold water. Braided his hair fifty-two times, one plait for each living member of the tribe, each plait tied off with a finger bone of the tribe's dead. Despite his careful preparations, the bullock had

stumbled before the sacrifice, Bel had hidden his golden face behind the clouds, and the ritual fire had taken forever to kindle. Although faith and experience told him balance would be restored, in the last six moons it seemed that the Lord of Chaos would triumph over the Maker for control of the world.

Gortin cleared his throat, jarring Struath from his thoughts. "Aye, Gortin. I know." Seeing his initiate's downcast expression, Struath softened his voice. "Will you fetch the ram's horn?"

Gortin nodded, eager and obedient as a dog.

Gods forgive me. He is a good man, loyal and true. I must be kinder to him.

Struath rose stiffly, waving away Gortin's hand. "Are you ready, Tinnean?"

Tinnean nodded, gazing at him with those shining eyes. Struath wondered if he had possessed such purity of spirit at that age. He hesitated, then leaned forward to press his lips against the boy's forehead. Belatedly, he offered the same blessing to Gortin, turning away abruptly when he saw tears in his initiate's eyes.

He seized his blackthorn staff and ducked outside the hut. The cold hit him like a blow. He breathed in quick, shallow breaths to keep from coughing, smiling wryly as Tinnean raised his face skyward, sucking in great gulps of the frigid air. Thankfully, Bel had re-emerged from the clouds. At last, a good omen.

Gortin sounded the ram's horn three times, its low, mournful call filling the silence of the village. One by one, families emerged from their huts and formed a circle around the fire pit where slabs of meat roasted under hot stones in preparation for the morrow's feast. A few men cast longing glances in that direction. Patches of damp earth showed through the snow where the men had scraped away the blood and entrails; at least this year, Red Dugan had remained sober enough to complete the task properly.

Yeorna approached with Lisula behind her, bearing the leather flask of sacrificial blood. Struath nodded, signaling the Grain-Mother to begin the chant.

A rim of sunlight still haloed Eagles Mount, staining the uppermost branches of the forest orange. The rest of their valley lay in shadow; the circled huts resembled twenty small cairns. Shaking off the disturbing image, Struath walked sunwise around his kinfolk, pressing the back of his left hand to each forehead, blessing each person with the touch of the tattooed acorn. He repressed a pang at the sunken cheeks, the new lines etched by grief. Nearly one hundred people had gathered here at Midsummer, but little more than half remained.

He extended his hand to offer his blessing to Darak, then drew back at the mingled reek of starchy body odor and brogac. Instead of hanging his head in shame as any decent man would, Darak had the effrontery to stare down at him, his eyes as menacing and gray as storm clouds.

He could no more permit Darak to attend the rite in this condition than he could tolerate such an open challenge. But after all the bad omens, he feared that the absence of even one voice would undermine the Oak-Lord's strength.

As if sensing his quandary, Darak smiled. That decided him. Struath stepped back and raised his voice so all could hear. "Darak, you are an affront to gods and men alike. Go back to your hut. On the morrow, I will choose a fitting punishment for your irreverence."

The strangled cry shattered Darak's veneer of cockiness. As one, their gazes shifted to Tinnean. The boy's lips were pressed together to prevent another outburst, but his eyes pleaded with him to relent. Struath hesitated, knowing how much Darak's absence would wound Tinnean. He turned back to Darak, waiting for some sign of repentance. Instead, his expression hardened into its usual stoniness, and he stalked away.

Worried murmurs rose from the rest of the tribe. Struath quelled them with a peremptory gesture. ~~“Only one who is clean in body and mind may stand before our heart-oak. Only then can we help the Oak defeat the Holly.”~~

Tinnean’s head drooped. His shoulders rose and fell in a shuddering breath. When he raised his head again, he nodded once. Struath wished he could call Darak back, if only to restore the light to the boy’s face, but not even for Tinnean would he allow his authority to be undermined.

Three times, Struath thumped the frozen earth with his blackthorn staff. Three times, Yeorna raised and lowered the dried sheaf of barley, the symbol of the Grain-Mother’s power. Tinnean and Lisula broke the circle; tonight, the youngest had the honor of leading the tribe into the forest.

Struath eyed the guttering torches and murmured a brief prayer to strengthen the fire. A balky bullock could be ignored. Even Darak’s arrogance could be overlooked; he had refused permission to attend the rites before because of drunkenness. The death of the flames would be disastrous.

The bones in his hair clicked in a gust of wind. Once, wool and piety had been enough to shield him from the cold, but long before the procession reached the forest’s verge, Struath was shivering so hard that his staff shook in his numbed fingers. The icy air seared his lungs. As he picked his way along the narrow forest trail, his chants barely rose above a whisper. Yeorna, bless her, chanted all the louder so the others would not notice.

He knew there were whispers in the tribe, though none dared to speak against him openly. After all their troubles, it was only natural that some would wonder if he had lost his power to intercede with the gods. Tonight, he would prove them wrong. And tomorrow, he would humble Darak before the entire tribe.

It had been thirty years since the elders of the Oak Tribe had named him Tree-Father, the youngest ever to be accorded the honor. Thirty years since Brun—may his spirit live on in the sunlit Forever Isles—had stood before him and gouged out his left eye with the point of the ceremonial bronze dagger. The right eye to see this world, the blind one to penetrate the unseen one.

Surreptitiously, Struath wiped his cheek. Thirty years and still the cold made tears ooze from the empty socket. Aching joints he understood, and fingers too swollen to close into a fist. But how could an empty eye weep?

Not that he was ancient, he reminded himself. Mother Netal and the Memory-Keeper were older. Only three of them left who remembered Morgath as a living man, not merely as the central character in a gruesome cautionary tale.

At the thought of his predecessor, Struath forced his numb fingers to make the sign against evil. “That it may not come through earth, through water, through air,” he muttered. Relenting, he added a quick prayer that Morgath’s spirit might have found light and peace. Power he would not wish him, his mentor had hungered for it too much while he lived.

The words brought on a coughing fit that left him feeling as weak as a newborn lamb. He thrust the weakness aside, along with the resentment of knowing how few rites remained to him. All across the world, tribes were gathering to drive away the dark with songs and shouts and blazing torchlight. Tonight, all his strength, all his power must be concentrated on the battle in the grove.

Tinnean and Lisula stepped aside as they reached the clearing. The chanting ceased, leaving only the sigh of the wind and the groan of bare branches. Struath closed his eye, allowing the ages-old strength of the forest to fill him, drawing on the power of the earth beneath him and the sky above him to drive out cold and pride and doubt. Only then did he open his eye to find Tinnean watching him. So young, Maker bless him, and so eager, illuminated by an inner light far brighter than the torch flame. Once, he had possessed that radiance—or so Morgath had said.

Shaking off his memories, he stepped into the glade. Soaring pines reached skyward, dark, jagged silhouettes against the violet sky. The other trees were indistinguishable from one another in the gloom save for the venerable heart-oak. The light from their torches cast strange shadows on the sacred tree, making the runneled bark seem to shift and move, creating a mouth that now smiled, now frowned, and eyes that followed their movements.

Struath nodded to Tinnean who took his place before the heart-oak. Then he hesitated. Belatedly, Struath realized why.

Tradition called for him to pass his torch to the oldest male of his family. That honor should have fallen to Darak. An uncomfortable moment passed before Sim stepped forward. Struath nodded curtly and the Memory-Keeper accepted the torch. When he retreated, Struath stepped forward to stand by Tinnean's side.

"In the time before time, The People came to this land. Our ancestors worshiped the One Tree that is Two—the One Tree that is the Oak and the Holly."

He paused to allow the tribe to intone the traditional response. "May its roots remain ever strong."

"From one People, we became two tribes, forever linked by our common history."

Again, the tribe responded. "May our bond remain ever strong."

"Since the time before time, we have gathered before our heart-oak to honor the gods and perform our sacred rites. It is fitting that on this holy day, we gather not only to lend our strength to the Oak-Lord in his battle tonight, but to honor this man's commitment to the way of the priest."

"May his path remain ever clear."

Gortin sounded the ram's horn as Struath faced Tinnean. "Tinnean, son of Reinek and Cluran. Before the gods of our people, do you affirm your willingness to be initiated?"

"I do so affirm."

"Before the sacred tree of our tribe, do you affirm your willingness to be initiated?"

"I do so affirm."

"Before the people of your tribe, do you affirm your willingness to be initiated?"

"I do so affirm."

"Kneel, then."

Tinnean knelt between two of the oak's exposed roots. Struath gazed down at him. His vision blurred. Thirty years ago, he had knelt there to cut out Morgath's heart.

Do not taint this sacred place by thinking of him.

Struath paused to gather himself. Tonight of all nights, his mind must be uncluttered.

"Tinnean, son of Reinek and Cluran. Do you vow to honor the gods, worshiping them with your body, your mind, and your spirit?"

"I do so vow."

"Do you vow to honor the Oak and the Holly, worshiping them with your body, your mind, and your spirit?"

"I do so vow."

"Do you vow to honor the laws of our tribe, following them with your body, your mind, and your spirit?"

"I do so vow."

Gortin stepped forward, holding the cluster of acorns. He raised them toward the naked branches of the heart-oak before pressing them against Tinnean's forehead. "The blessing of the Oak upon you."

Lisula proffered the leather flask. Struath dipped his forefinger into it and daubed Tinnean's cheeks with two spots of blood. "The blessing of the Holly upon you."

The Grain-Mother touched Tinnean's chest with her sheaf of barley. "The blessing of the fruitful earth upon you."

Even in the fading light, Struath could see the awe on the boy's face as he took him by the shoulders. He could still recall the shiver of excitement that had shaken his body so long ago, the swell of pride when he rose to his feet, the comfort of Morgath's hands on his shoulders . . .

Struath shook his head, frowning, and Tinnean's expectant smile died. He offered the boy a quick reassuring nod and turned him to face the tribe.

"He knelt before us a man. He stands before us a priest. Welcome, Tinnean. Initiate of the Oak Tribe."

"Welcome, Tinnean." The shout rolled through the glade, shattering the forest's stillness. The sound was still fading when Struath raised his hand.

"People of the Oak. The day is waning. On the morrow, we will celebrate the Oak's victory and Tinnean's first battle rite. But now we must make ready."

The Memory-Keeper began the song, his quavering voice quickly supported by others.

*"Now is the dark time.
The sun's light is ebbing.
The old year is waning.
The earth is asleep.*

*Now at the dark time
The Oak-Lord awakens.
The Holly-Lord threatens.
The battle begins.
Pray for the Oak.
Help him vanquish the Holly.
Pray for the Oak.
Make the darkness retreat.*

*Sing to the Oak
And the earth will awaken.
Sing to the Oak
And the spring will return."*

As they sang, Struath led the procession around the heart-oak. He offered the first gift, sprinkling blood from the flask over the tree's roots. Children crumbled oatcakes, women poured libations of berry wine, men paused to tie arrows and fishhooks to the lowest branches. The last streaks of color were fading from the sky when he motioned the priests aside. It was time.

Only at sunset and sunrise, when the boundary between the worlds was thin, could they make the crossing. The first time, he had expected bolts of lightning or howling winds to mark the passage. Although he knew how it would happen, the wonder was as great as ever when he uttered the ancient words of permission and, between one step and the next, led the priests out of their tribal glade and into the grove of the First Forest.

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