

The Forest Paradox

By Verna McKinnon

Jenna ignored the raven's shrill caw and burrowed deeper beneath the warm covers, reluctant to wake. Obstinate in his duty, the raven persisted, rapping his long sharp beak against the glass with ruthless rhythm until she finally groaned, kicking off her quilt in disgust.

"Coming!" she cried hoarsely, stumbling toward the window. She unlatched the casement and opened it, squinting against the cruel sunshine. The irate raven pecked at her leg to get her attention.

"Ouch!" she winced, rubbing her thigh and glaring down at the stubborn bird. "That was uncalled for."

The raven's piercing gaze did not falter as he stuck out his leg, indicating a tiny scroll tied with red ethereal thread. She touched the glowing cord and it vanished, releasing the miniature scroll of golden parchment into her hand.

It was a summons from the Witches Council. Good. Work was just what she needed. She scanned the letter as the raven tolerantly waited for her reply. The forest around Red Leaf village was cursed. The Witch Council decreed that the good folk of Red Leaf required magical assistance and chose to dispatch Jenna to investigate their predicament. It was better news than she could have hoped for. Not that she wanted folks to suffer, of course. She unrolled more of the tiny scroll, reading of Red Leaf's mystical troubles until the raven cried his impatience.

"Oh, so sorry. Thank you, Mr. Raven. Tell them I accept," she said.

The bird cawed brusquely in response and she offered him a few choice walnuts from the dish next to her bed for his trouble. It was only good manners to tip the courier.

"Next time, keep your beak to yourself," she warned.

The raven curtly nodded, but accepted her nutty offerings. When he finished, he flew away, disappearing without a backward glance.

"Just like the men in my life," she said dryly, closing the window.

Relieved, she happily prepared for her journey until her mother insisted that her brother Derek accompany her as well.

"Your father thinks it'll be good training for the boy. He's sixteen now and his witchcraft needs tempering," her mother insisted, packing her best blue velvet gown.

"But Mother, I planned to go alone. I'm doing my duty as a witch, not going to harvest festival. I certainly don't need a fine dress for where I'm going."

“Well, you never know,” her mother shrugged, adding a vial of perfume.

So Derek accompanied Jenna the hundred odd miles to Red Leaf. The gruff coachman found every rut in the road and each violent jolt jarring her bones. The cramped carriage was smelly too. She gritted her teeth, enduring Derek’s endless questions between thumbing through his tome and polishing his newly carved witch staff with a soft cloth.

“What magical rituals do you think we will need? Have you even been to Red Leaf before? How many spells should I charged in my staff?”

“I don’t know Derek,” she repeated over and over, recalling how when he was four and asked why a thousand times to every question answered. Jenna, then an intolerant girl of thirteen, mostly ignored him-or threatened to turn him into a toad.

When they arrived at the tiny village of Red leaf, they were met by a heavysset man surrounded by several dour-faced villagers.

“Cheerful bunch,” Derek mumbled as he stepped from the coach.

“Mind your tongue,” she warned.

“I know, I know. Life as a warty toad.”

The stout man, sweating in the warm afternoon sun, smiled broadly as he reached for Jenna’s hand. “Welcome! Welcome to Red Leaf!” he gushed. “I am Mayor Garwyn.” He bowed and clumsily kissed her hand. “You must be Mistress Jenna. We thank the Witch Council for sending us help so quickly.”

“We are here to serve, good sir,” Jenna replied.

Middle-aged and balding, Garwyn’s tufts of reddish hair sprouted wild around his ears and flowing gray robes did not conceal his ample girth. He clutched her hand and she winced at the clamminess of his touch. Jenna gently pulled away and wiped her hand on the back of her skirt when he turned toward Derek.

“And who is your handsome companion?” Garwyn exclaimed. “Did the illustrious Witch Council send me two mages for our troubles? I am indeed honored!”

“May I present my younger brother, Derek. He is a newly sanctioned witch and my, um, assistant on this investigation for educational purposes.”

“I have so much to learn,” Derek said with mock sincerity, clutching his staff to his chest.

Jenna gave Derek a withering look.

Garwyn nodded his approval, “Well, the more help the better, I say. We have room at the inn. This time of year few tourists come anyway.”

“You have tourists?” Derek asked with an arched brow.

Garwyn nodded to one of the somber villagers who picked up their bags. Waving the guests along the creaking wooden sidewalk toward the inn, he said, “Our modest village has an impressive history. Two hundred years ago this town was the sight of the last battle of the Sivedan Wars. Our brave countrymen defended their homes with only homemade swords and pitchforks until our King’s army arrived. Our legendary good King Barsulee defeated the conqueror Ta’groth of Siveda right here in Red Leaf. Afterwards, the King himself feasted with our folk for three days and nights in celebration.”

“I studied the Sivedan Wars at school,” Derek said. “I’d forgotten the last battle happened around here.”

“Oh yes,” Garwyn replied with glee. “Ta’groth of Siveda crossed the borders, unleashing his warriors on our village and burning our fields! Ta’groth used sorcery to achieve his conquests; enslaving so many kingdoms so easily but it didn’t save him in the end. King Barsulee slew him and stuck his head on a pike. It was paraded around the village while folks danced for joy. Each year, we reenact that great moment during the harvest festival.”

“How...charming,” Jenna offered with a forced smile.

“You must be so proud,” Derek added somberly, though his eyes glinted with mischief.

“We are very serious about our heritage,” Garwyn said solemnly.

They arrived at a squat two story wooden building. A weathered sign hung of above the door, declaring it as, ‘The Gallant Goose Inn,’ showing a fat yellow goose holding a mug of ale.

Garwyn led them through the crowded main taproom where folks were drinking or eating. She sensed curiosity and a vague hope in their eyes.

“Mayor, though I enjoy the history of your fine town,” Jenna said as she followed Garwyn up the narrow wooden stairs, “what can you tell me about this strange malady blighting your forest?”

“Ah, then you haven’t seen it yet,” Garwyn moaned. “I forget you traveled here by the southern road,” huffing and wheezing as he climbed the steps. “It’s just a few more miles north outside town. The forest death happened about two weeks ago. Overnight our woodland was dead. The animals vanished. Plus, there’s no magic left in the forest. At least, old Meg says so.”

“Old Meg?” Jenna asked.

“Our village witch. Meg insists magic isn’t responsible, but I sent a message to the Witches Council anyway. We love old Meg but...”

“You don’t believe her?” Jenna added.

The mayor looked uneasy and glanced around nervously, lowering his voice before continuing. “Meg is very old. Her magic tends to fizzle more often than not. Meg claims there’s no curse or bad magic on our woods, but what other explanation could there be for such a thing? It’s a paradox we cannot solve.”

“I must see this cursed wood before nightfall,” Jenna said.

They gave Derek a room next to hers. “Be ready to leave in ten minutes,” Jenna said. “Wear your warm cloak and remember to charge your staff-”

“Yes, Mother,” Derek smiled as he disappeared inside his small room.

“I’d contain that sarcasm,” she retorted as the door slammed shut. Perhaps she should turn him into toad? If she could fathom an explanation to her mother she just might.

The mayor ignored their familial squabble and opened the door to a modest room with white-washed walls and a colorful rag rug covered the wooden floor.

“Finest room in the Gallant Goose Inn,” he told her with a proud expression.

“Most excellent and it fits my needs quite well,” she smiled warmly. “Thank you. I will join you downstairs in a few moments.”

Satisfied by her approval, Garwyn departed. The grim-faced villager dropped her bag without a word and left on the mayor’s heels, closing the door behind him.

Jenna looked about the rustic chamber. ‘Finest room’ consisted of a thin rose pattern cotton quilt covering a narrow iron-framed bed. A fresh bar of soap lay atop clean but threadbare white towels next to a chipped washbasin on the table. She could hardly have expected such a simple village to offer more and she was gratified by their concern for her comfort. It was nice to be alone for a moment. She sat down on the bed, smiling at the squeaky springs.

After changing into a pair of sturdy walking shoes, Jenna splashed water on her face to refresh her flagging energy. She tried to brush out her red hair, but too tired to fuss, she tied it back with a thick blue ribbon, one of many vanity items her well-meaning mother packed along with the velvet and scent. Strapping on her mage pouch, she grabbed her witch staff and left the room.

Knocking on Derek’s door, she looked inside and found him levitating above the bed, doing somersaults.

“Time to go. You can play later.”

“Coming, coming,” Derek grumbled, settling back to the floor.

Downstairs she met Garwyn and said, “We are ready to go.”

“Excellent. Your bodyguard is ready to guide you to the forest. He arrived early this morning.”

“Bodyguard?” Jenna replied with a raised eyebrow.

“Hello Jenna,” said a familiar deep voice.

Jenna sucked in her breath and spun around. A leather-clad figure lounged against the roughhewn tables near the bar. A sheathed sword was slung across his back and battle-scarred hands lifted a tin cup to his lips.

Jack!

“Miss me,” he grinned.

She wanted to slap that grin off his face.

“This is Jack Rylee, a warrior of great repute,” Garwyn said.

“We are already acquainted,” Jenna replied crisply.

“This is going to be good,” Derek giggled.

She elbowed Derek in the ribs.

Jack looked quite different now. His black hair was messy and gray eyes were set in a sun-browned face shadowed with stubble. He usually had kept himself clean shaven when they had been a couple.

She turned to the mayor, channeling all her ability to remain calm. “I don’t need a hired sword?” Jenna demanded.

Garwyn replied indignantly, “Jack showed up yesterday and insisted he was sent as your protector by the witch council.”

“I do not require a ‘protector.’ Least of all from a simple swordsman.”

“I’m not that simple,” Jack protested.

“I would beg to differ,” Jenna retorted.

Garwyn shook his head. “Please, please! He may be able to help. Magic cannot solve everything you know.”

“Magic serves me quite well,” Jenna said firmly. “And magic and steel do not mix, as you informed me not long ago, Jack.”

She marched toward the door, swinging it open with a wave of her arm. Derek and Jack followed her at a safe distance. With the aid of a map Garwyn hastily scribbled for them, they set out along the northern road.

After an hour of silent marching, Jack finally had enough and caught up with her. “For a tiny thing you are hard to keep up with. Jenna, will you at least look at me,” Jack pleaded. “I came here to talk to you.”

“Have you considered your life as a toad?” she asked and quickened her step.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Jack said.

“Try me,” she challenged, striding with swift little steps. “I see it now, a strong toad of bold green with his mighty sword, croaking and leaping throughout the land-”

“You can’t threaten me into silence,” Jack challenged. “I tried to reach you, but you already left for Red Leaf. Your mother said you were coming here and-”

“Of course she did!” Jenna sighed.

“I got here first because I know all the best roads and my horse is faster than a carriage. I came here to talk. I told the mayor the council sent me too-after all, who knows what’s in those woods. Just listen to me!”

“No!” Jenna hissed and broke into a run.

“Jenna!”

“I wouldn’t press it Jack,” Derek advised as he juggled colored balls of light. “But if you hurt my sister again, your fate may be worse than a toad.”

When they finally arrived at a crossroads, marked by a faded and leaning old sign post, she stopped suddenly, panting from exertion, but keeping a straight-backed posture to spite Jack. She realized why the woods frightened the villagers.

The forest was a nightmare. The trees, some over two hundred feet high, towered like massive gray gravestones. Everything looked blanched and withered. Not a single green leaf or flower remained untouched by the mysterious blight.

“What magic could do this?” Derek asked, his magical colored balls dissolving as he tread closer with unusual prudence.

Jenna was stunned. Still she calmed down to use her witch senses. “I don’t sense any magic, Derek. Their old witch might be right. I don’t feel a curse either.”

“Are you sure?” Derek said.

“Close your eyes and concentrate.”

Even though standing still for more than a minute was always a trial, Derek obeyed.

“Will this take long?” Jack asked.

“Shut up,” Jenna and Derek replied in unison.

Derek nodded and opened his eyes. “You’re right. I can’t detect any type of enchantment...no wicked curses either. Could this be darkcraft?”

She shook her head. “No, darkcraft leaves a mystical scar on what it touches. We would sense that. The magnitude of this horror would require complex darkcraft at its highest levels. It would make us sick too, Derek, and I don’t feel anything but confusion.” She walked closer to the woods.

“I’d be careful Jenna,” Jack said.

“I can look out for myself. Derek, search around the dead rim. See what you can detect, be it natural or mystical. Be back here in half an hour.”

“What if I meet a monster?” Derek grinned.

“Run fast,” replied Jenna dryly.

“I always knew you cared,” Derek laughed and set off along the rim.

“What about me?” Jack asked.

“Stand there and look brave. Warriors are good at that,” Jenna replied, walking into the dead woods. Jack followed her.

“I’m just doing my job,” Jack said when she looked back angrily.

“How noble of you,” she replied.

She tried to focus on the forest. The dull grayish withered bark was like stone to the touch. Dead leaves still clung to the branches. The flowers were sad drooping things, all color bleached from the fragile petals. It was early autumn and the foliage should be shading to crisp gold and red tones, not gray remnants of decay.

“Jenna, I need to talk to you-”

“Not now Jack,” she replied. “I’m working.” She knelt, scooping a handful of dirt into her hand. She smelled the soil and rubbed it between her fingers. The earth was neither cursed nor diseased by any means she understood.

Jenna sighed and dropped the dirt, wiping her hand on her skirt. How is it she could sense nothing?

“What do your witchy senses detect?” Jack inquired, leaning against a dead tree.

“Nothing, that’s the trouble,” Jenna said in a low voice, sarcasm oddly absent in her voice.

She tested the dead trees and plants for magical curses and natural diseases, infestations of insects or parasites-but found nothing that explained the sad state of this place. Her witch senses and pouch of magical potions and herbs, usually so reliable, yielded no answers.

“Where are the all animals?” Jack asked, looking around.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. Considering the state of the place, it wasn’t surprising. She took meager comfort in finding no dead animals here. Keenly aware of the fading autumn sun, she wanted to return to the village. Before the three moons rose, she intended to be safe and warm back at the inn.

Jenna and Jack mutely returned to where they parted at the forest edge.

“Where’s Derek?” Jenna asked. “He should have returned by now.”

“He’s a big boy,” Jack replied. “Give him time. While we are waiting for that brother of yours, perhaps you’ll listen-”

“I shouldn’t have let him go into this wretched place alone.”

Jack pulled at his hair in frustration, but even he was concerned. “You’re right. It’s almost sunfall. There’s not a hint of the crows or other birds gathering in the surrounding trees. I don’t like it.”

Jenna searched around the forest’s rim. “That’s not all. There are no sprites or wood nymphs hiding in leafy shadows or dancing through the beams of fading sunlight. They’re gone, Jack. Not even the flutter of fairy wings or a mushroom glowing with the hidden promise of enchantment exists here. It’s not natural.”

The combination of her fears growing, Jack obstinate presence, and shadows falling around her, she finally cried out, “Derek! Where are you? DEREK!”

Maybe demons are to blame, she thought with a rising panic. She imagined impish devils crouched in some gloomy pit, drooling as they hungrily watched her hapless brother.

“Derek!” she cried, running along the edge of the dead forest as the day edged toward ever darkening twilight.

A white wolf bolted from a dark clump of petrified trees. An animal! Jenna started with both shock and hope, but raised her staff defensively. A sleep charm warmed upon her fingers, as she readied for the attack. Jack unsheathed his sword, ready to protect her, but she did not want to hurt a forest creature unless necessary and shoved him out of the way. Wolves normally do not seek the company of people, but things were too bizarre here to take chances.

Just as the wolf leapt toward her, it suddenly shapeshifted into Derek! He stumbled into her arms, almost knocking her over.

“Damn it boy, I could have killed you!” Jack shouted.

Jenna exhaled with relief before smacking Derek on the arm with her staff. “Where have you been? And when did you learn to shapeshift?” Jenna hit him again in frustration.

“Did I impress you?” Derek asked excitedly.

“No,” Jenna snapped hotly.

“Really? What about you, Jack?”

“NO!” Jack barked. “This is no place for games, boy.”

“Leave him alone, Jack. This has nothing to do with you.”

“If I’m to protect you it does!” Jack shouted.

“You relinquished that right when you broke our betrothal,” Jenna snapped. She stomped away, her staff striking the ground with each agitated step, sparking the earth with mystical sparks.

Derek chased after her. “I excelled in shapeshifting at the Academy, you know. My professor told me I make a fine wolf.”

“You make a fine fool. I almost hit you with a sleep enchantment and Jack almost skewered you.” She slowed her stride and chewed her lip in thought and her brow furrowed. “This is more difficult than I imagined. The last thing I need now is to fail a mission the Witch Council has entrusted to me.” She glanced back at Jack, who had the good sense to stand a good ten paces from her.

“You’ll figure it out, Sis. And forget about Jack. That tubby mayor hired him as a guardian for you, but he can’t fix this—you can. If Jack was fool enough to cast off my sister, then he go can rot.

“Very well, Derek, you’re right. Jack can go rot. And I will find out why the forest is cursed.”

A rare look of understanding shaded Derek’s expression. She wanted to thump him.

They walked briskly toward the village; a luminous glow atop Jenna’s staff guided them through the growing darkness.

Jack’s steady stride followed close behind.

They found the inn crowded upon their return. The villagers were mumbling amongst themselves, fearful of what the witches had found. Only the innkeeper seemed content with his lot, for many drank cups of ale to soothe their worries. Jenna saw an old crone huddled in the corner, wispy white hair peeking through the tattered plaid shawl covering her head. The old woman snorted with laughter as she slurped her brew, a staff of fine oak clenched in her bony hand.

“That must be the village witch,” Jenna whispered to Derek.

Garwyn bustled forward at seeing them enter.

“Keep the Mayor busy,” Jenna said to Derek. “Tell him what we found, but no one else. I want to talk to their witch and there’s no sense upsetting the whole village yet.”

“What do you want me to do?” Jack asked.

“Look brave. It’s what you’re good at.”

She turned away, even though a shadow of pain seemed to cloud his eyes.

Jenna studied the old woman. Her oak staff had a raven’s head carved into the top of it. Jenna gripped her own white birch staff; the top bore the likeness of an owl’s head, and noticed for the first time that Derek’s witch staff bore the head of a wolf. She vaguely recalled Derek showing off his new staff only a few weeks ago after she and Jack broke up. She had been so engrossed in her personal despair that she did not realize her brother was growing up. Receiving a staff was an enormous step for a witch. She approached the old woman, smiling.

“Pardon me. You must be Meg the village witch. I am-”

“We are doomed!” Garwyn wailed aloud, waving his arms. He turned to Jenna, and cried, “Your brother has confirmed what old Meg believes.”

Jenna winced. “So much for keeping this quiet.”

“I tried to explain,” Derek cried.

The crowd began to buzz nervously.

“Then we’re right to be afraid!” a man at a nearby table shouted.

“There is a rational explanation, good people.” Jenna tried to calm them. “I promise to do all in my power to find it.”

“There’s nothing to be done,” cried another, “if our forest is cursed.”

“But I did not find any curse!” Jenna insisted.

“If all the animals and magic are dead, then we are doomed,” cried an old man. “Old Meg was right.”

“What if it spreads to the town? To our farmsteads? We’ll starve! We’ll die!”

The villagers were bordering on hysteria and the swelling noise made her head ache. A spark of light burst from Jenna’s staff like a beacon. “Please calm down! I don’t believe it killed the wildlife. We saw no dead animals during our search. Please good people,” she spoke in a firm voice, “listen to me!”

“I told ya’ the forest was dead,” Meg spat. “No darkcraft, curse or demons did this either! The pretty witch knows I am right! You called in some young slip of a girl from the Witch Council ‘cause you didn’t believe me!” Meg cackled and pointed to Garwyn with her staff. “Thinkin’ poor Meg’s gone soft in the head, like an old pumpkin! Thinkin’ her magic is better than mine ‘cause she’s pretty and has a firm bosom?”

Jenna blushed and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Please, dear Meg,” Garwyn pleaded, wringing his hands. “Don’t upset yourself! You’re very frail now.”

Meg staff swatted the mayor’s plump thigh.

“She looks pretty hearty to me,” Derek whispered to Jenna.

“I wouldn’t take her on,” Jack commented with a grin.

“Has Meg served this village all of her life?” Jenna finally asked when Garwyn jumped out of Meg’s swinging distance, surprisingly agile for a man of his girth.

“Yes,” the mayor blustered; nervously blotting his sweaty face with an embroidered handkerchief. “Meg’s like family to us all.”

“More like a cursed stepchild,” Meg sniffed.

“Now Meg, you should realize your limitations,” Garwyn said.

“I’ll show you limitations,” Meg threatened, a ball of red magic burning bright in her withered hand.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” the Mayor gasped, ducking behind Jenna. The laughter of the townsfolk did not shame him from his fear. But Jenna was glad of their laughter. It helped relieve the gnawing fear that they suffered.

But the brightness of Meg’s magic faded as swiftly as she summoned it. Her hands shook and tears welled in the old woman’s eyes. “Drat! Silly old spell. No matter. Got better ones at home. I’ve a tome thick with enchantment.” Her pale eyes glittered at Jenna. “Jealous?”

Jenna knelt before Meg, leaving Garwyn to cringe next to Derek. She took Meg’s gnarled old hands in her own and smiled, “Yes, for you must have magic beyond my dreams. Please, good Meg, forgive poor Garwyn. I’m sure your wisdom will be valuable to us all. We need your help. I know your tome must rival many a witch for the magic.”

Meg chuckled and said, “Well...I do have some potent spells tucked away. Enchantments girls like you would covet for their witch books.” She glanced up at Jenna and shrugged, “Well, I’ll forgive Garwyn and even forgive you for being so pretty.”

“And firm of bosom,” Jack added with a grin.

Derek snickered, but both he and Jack stepped back when they met Jenna's furious stare, her fingertips flaring with magic.

Jenna then faced the villagers and said, "Good people, we must all work together. I'll need an account of anything and everything out of the ordinary you might recall about the last several days before this happened. Any information, no matter how trivial, could be useful in solving this terrible blight. Tomorrow at dawn I will return to the woods. Perhaps Jack may be kind enough to help Meg collect this information, if he is not too busy being brave."

Jack bowed gracefully and grinned, "I'm happy to serve, Mistress Jenna, even in this most humble capacity."

Jenna walked past him without a word, but her thoughts were seething. "Warriors. Bloody nuisances! All swagger with false hearts and--"

Jack's deep voice called after her, "I'll be waiting at dawn to escort you to the forest, Jenna."

She did not acknowledge his words, but continued on to her room as her mental tirade caused the air to spark with magical current. The world is full of blustering men like Jack. His last words haunted her again, the words that broke their betrothal. "I'm not ready to settle down. I've a chance for real adventure. I want to live first."

Why did he think wedlock meant giving up your life? That love would be his doom? Would he really rather face dragons and monsters than marry her? She collapsed on the bed and sobbed for a brief moment before her iron control reasserted itself. No more! She jumped off the bed and splashed cold water on her face and washed away her tears, vowing she would never cry over Jack again.

The next morning they met in the taproom.

"Where's Meg," Jenna asked. "I thought she would meet us at the inn."

"The old witch said she'd be waiting at the sign posts near the forest," Jack answered. "She wanted to go back home because she had an idea she wanted to follow up on."

"Did she mention what it was?" Jenna asked. "Did you even think to ask her?"

"I did, but she wouldn't say," Jack replied.

"Very helpful," Jenna said, walking ahead of both Jack and Derek out the front door.

"You know it's hard for me to protect you when you keep doing that!" Jack shouted after her.

"This is going to be a long day," Derek sighed.

They walked in silence out of the village. Jack's long strides quickly took him ahead of Jenna and she struggled to keep up. Jack kept his hand on his belt, in which a long dagger was tucked for easy access.

They had to stop and wait for Derek. He finally caught up with them. He leaned against his staff and wheezed, "My head feels like a troll bashed it in. I only had two mugs of ale last night."

"Red Leaf ale is brutal. The folks of Red Leaf brew their own and the recipe is secret," Jack said. "Pretty strong stuff too."

"Yet you are quite sober and clear of eye," Jenna replied.

"I can hold my ale, Jenna," he winked.

"But little else it seems," she remarked.

They reached the tilted guide posts and Jenna put out her arm to stop them.

"What is it?" Jack asked, drawing his sword.

"Look at the path and the sign. It has spread. The dead grass was nowhere near the sign post yesterday."

"She's right," Derek said.

Jack bolted toward the forest.

"Hey! Wait!" Jenna shouted, chasing after him.

Then she saw why he ran. Huddled on the ground in her tattered shawl was Meg, clutching a large book. Jack and Jenna dropped to the ground where she lay.

"Is she alive?" Jenna asked.

"Yes," Jack said, finding her pulse.

The old witch twitched and her eyes blinked.

"Meg, can you hear me?" Jenna shouted.

She moaned and rolled over, "I'm not deaf, girl. My poor legs gave way and I just couldn't run no more."

"Run from what?" Derek asked fearfully.

Jack gently lifted her head, holding the water canteen to her lips. After a few sips she opened her eyes.

"Better?" Jack asked.

She slowly sat up, still clutching the book to her chest. “Be better if a splash of ale were mixed in that water, boy.”

“What happened?” Jenna pressed.

“I read some old tomes and journals of witches past in Red Leaf. I found something from an old witch named Bertha. It talked about a monster.”

“Monster?” Jenna whispered.

“Yep. A nasty one. One that sucks out magic.”

“That would explain why we sensed no magic or curse,” Derek said.

Meg sniffled and said, “I decided to go to the forest and face it alone. I wanted to show the village I didn’t need anyone to help my magic,” Meg whispered.

“Of course you don’t,” Jenna said.

“But trouble is...I found it. I saw it in the heart of the forest...feeding. It frightened old Meg. So I ran. Meg’s not so brave. I ran until I collapsed here. These old bones don’t like to run anymore.”

Jenna asked, “What is feeding? Tell me!”

“It isn’t magic or curses eating our forest. Nor is it demon. This is a monster. A nasty monster that slept in this forest for two hundred years. Well, it’s not sleeping now and it’s hungry,” Meg nodded with a whimper.

“What kind of monster?” Derek asked.

Meg held out the old, battered book. “This kind.”

A full page drawing in black and white showed a hideous beast.

“I found it in an old tome that belonged to one of the witches of Red leaf. All the old tomes of witches are preserved, thank goodness. They are passed to the new witch for safe keeping, and for knowledge.”

Jenna took the heavy book, which was thick and musty, crammed with enchantments. There were many things in the old tome, about fantastic beasts, spells, potion recipes, dragon breeds, and other magical creatures. A snowy owl feather marked the page with the picture of the monster that Meg referred to. Next to it was an old piece of writing on crumbling paper.

Meg pointed to it and said, “Bertha was the witch that confronted this beast. She was Red Leaf’s witch two hundred years ago. She witnessed the last battle of the Sivedan War-and more. She writes how the invader Ta’groth had a witch named Zeba in his pay and a monster they used to defeat armies. Our illustrious town history is missing some vital knowledge. Ta’groth used a monster called a Scindasgu.”

“A Scindasgu?” Derek asked. “What’s that?”

“A monster spawned in the Underworld. It’s a type of shadow being. What did you study at the academy?” Jenna asked.

Jack said, “But Ta’groth could not have controlled such a creature.”

Meg nodded and said, “He didn’t control it. His witch Zeba controlled the beast. Zeba was also Ta’groth’s lover, from what I read. She disappeared when Ta’groth was slain and most thought she had fled when her lover lost his head.”

“Indeed,” Jenna nodded and read more of the notes. “Old King Barsulee took the credit for slaying Ta’groth, but that is not what won the war, is it.”

Meg shook her head and said, “Our village witch Bertha is the real reason we had victory.”

Jack added, “That verifies the rumors that Ta’groth used magic to achieve power. Kings are also notorious for taking credit for the work of others. Scindasgu are believed to be immortal-or at least live for centuries. No one knows. They are not demons, true, but are nasty to deal with.”

“Yes,” Jenna said, surprised at his knowledge. “Such beasts can be controlled, but only through powerful darkcraft. This Zeba was a dark witch.”

Meg cackled and leaned against her staff. “Under Zeba’s control, the Scindasgu would stomp on the opposing soldiers. After it turned them into pulp, Ta’groth and his army would follow to kill the few left standing and take all the credit. Bertha wrote that when our noble king and Ta’groth were fighting it out, she challenged the witch Zeba here in this forest. Bertha killed Zeba, which released her hold over the Scindasgu. That’s why we won the war. What a wild magical battle between those two witches. I wish I could have seen them go at it.”

“But how does that explain what is happening now?” Jenna asked.

Meg looked back at the dead forest. “The enemy witch was slain, but her pet monster was not. According to Bertha’s journal, the monster howled like the devils of hell and snatched the dead body of his witch and fled deep into the woods and disappeared. Bertha hunted for it, but she never found it. It’s possible the monster went into hibernation. These beasts can slumber for centuries. Unfortunately, they tend to wake up hungry.”

“Judging by the look of this forest, it’s ravenous,” Jack commented.

Meg, using both her staff and Jack’s arm, struggled to her feet. “I ventured deeper in the woods to hunt it. Scindasgus feed on the earth when they wake. Its presence would be enough

to scare off natural wildlife and magical beings. Though I would never imagine it would be like this.”

“Well, let’s go slay the bloody thing,” Derek said.

Jack laid a firm hand on the young man’s shoulder. “Easy boy, do you even know how big it is? It used to take down whole armies.”

Meg did not laugh when she said, “Scindasgus are about twelve feet tall. Shadow-goers too.”

“Can we kill it?” Jack asked.

“Don’t know,” Meg replied. “But Bertha prepared a banishment spell just in case it ever showed its ugly face again.” Meg turned to a worn page in her thick book, the ink faded but legible.

A deep shadow lengthened around them as they talked in the grove of dead trees.

Derek stumbled back, his voice a forced whisper, “Jenna...Jack... I think we aren’t alone here.”

A deep roar silenced them.

Despite the open meadow at the edge of the woods and the sun shining above, a shade clung to the earth around them. A shadowy figure darted through the trees around the edge of the bleak forest. Jenna gasped, clutching her staff, trying to follow the shadow’s movement. She prayed her knees would not buckle.

Jack placed himself in front of Jenna, his sword in hand.

The creature seemed hazy at first. Jenna saw black mist hovering around it. Shadow-goers can be tricky to deal with, she recalled from her studies, trying to focus.

A howl erupted, like a death wind. A monster emerged in hideous glory. Nearly twelve feet tall, the monster’s features at first seemed to be fragments of stone, mud, and rotting tree limbs, like bizarre armor protecting its true form. Beneath the shell, it revealed hazy bits of shadowy stone from the Underworld of its origin. Fiery yellow eyes glared down at them as it stepped across the abyss in one step, enormous arms of gnarled murky stone rising above its head to strike.

“Oh....this is not good,” Jenna gulped.

The Scindasgu howled again and pressed its giant fists into the earth. Jenna could literally sense more life being drained from the woods. It roared again, shaking the forest around them.

Move!” Jack shouted, pushing the women from its grasp. “Run!”

Derek sidestepped the beast and shapeshifted into a wolf. He darted around the monster’s feet, nipping and growling.

“Derek!” Jenna cried. “Jack, save him!”

Jack attacked the beast, hacking at it with his sword. Though the beast was not harmed, Jack kept it at bay from her brother. The beast was angry now and raged, swinging its massive arms down at Jack.

“Jack look out!” Jenna cried when it almost crushed him with a single blow. He leapt back and rolled away as Derek nipped at its heels, distracting the monster.

Jenna tried to run to them, but Meg jerked her back by the hair.

“Let them be, girl. We need to invoke the banishment. Reel in your witchcraft where it can do some good!”

Shivering, Jenna nodded and they stood together. Meg was shaking so hard she fumbled and dropped the book, but Jenna snatched it up and tried to find the lost page. The beast roared again and took a threatening step forward. Jenna aimed her staff and issued a force of magic that pushed it back, though only briefly.

“I think you only made it angry,” Jack shouted.

“We need a circle of protection,” Jenna cried. “But I don’t have the time to call one.”

Derek shifted back into human form and shouted, “Just read the spell. I’ll summon the shield.”

Jenna shook her head. “But you’ve never-”

“Do it Derek! I’ll keep the monster busy,” Jack shouted.

Meg and Jenna hovered over the spell, reciting the words; holding on to each other out of fear. Jack kept the beast occupied by jabbing its heels with his blade and rolling away when the monster swatted at him. His foolish bravery allowed Derek to summon a circle of protection.

Thunderous stone fists striking the dead earth around them, falling dangerously close to the women and Derek. Jack leapt upon a dead tree limb and jumped upon the beast, clinging to its foul back as he stabbed it repeatedly until the Scindasgu threw him off. Jack dropped to the ground and jumped away before the beast brought its rocky fist down on him.

Derek waved to Jack and yelled, “Over here. Quickly before it flattens you like a pancake!”

Jack dodged another blow from the monster and sprinted toward the circle of protection, Derek opening a portal for him to enter and then closing it. The shimmering dome glowed around them in the shadowy wood.

Jenna and Meg continued the banishment incantation, fear in their voices as they summoned the magic with a final plea-

To the Underworld we banish this monster old

We cast out this Scindasgu from our fold

Hear us Spirits of the Underworld, Listen to our plea-

The Scindasgu screeched so loud Jenna thought her skull would split. The beast bashed at the shimmering dome, but Derek's magic held. Jack crouched in the circle with his sword poised to strike. Jenna and Meg shouted out the banishment incantation. The Scindasgu bayed and brought down its powerful fist again on the protective shield. Even Jack flinched, though the shining shield around them held firm.

Then something changed. The Scindasgu stopped striking them, but instead gripped the dome and began sucking the mystical power from the shield.

"Oh, no," Derek cried, "it's feeding on the magic!"

The monster was smarter than they bargained for and it was ripping the magic apart. Mute with terror, they clung to each other as the last threads of Derek's magic were dissolved. Terrified, Jenna sensed a firm arm around her waist. She looked up to see Jack at her side, his sword raised to protect them to the last.

"Why isn't the spell working?" Derek gasped as the shield vanished.

"Give it time!" Meg croaked.

"We are out of time," Jack shouted as the beast reached for them. He turned to Jenna and shouted above the din, "I came back for you. I love you." He impulsively kissed Jenna hard on the mouth.

Meg swatted them with her staff. "We're about to be crushed and your making a love pledge!"

Suddenly, the beast was pulled back by an unseen force. A powerful wind swirled up dust and dead leaves around the Scindasgu. The already grim forest darkened into a shadowy realm wrought up from the Underworld. The banishment spell had summoned mystical powers so strong it penetrated everything around them, sending shivers of magical currents not only through the forest but through them as well.

The Scindasgu shrieked now as its physical form began to shift and writhe from the power the witches summoned. A dark light, so intense despite its shadowy depth, it blinded them for a heartbeat. Then it struck the creature, pulling it into its sphere.

Then it was gone. The dark light. The monster.

They all looked around, dazed and shaken. Meg shouted, “We did it!” and scampered about like a young maid.

“That was a damn long spell,” Jack grumbled.

“You summon the powers of the Underworld and let me know if you can do it quicker,” Jenna snapped nervously.

“Point taken,” Jack said. “Now will you talk to me?”

“Yes,” Jenna nodded, “but I make no promises.”

“You two go do your mating dance,” Meg chuckled. “My poor woods are so damaged. They need healing, but it can be done, now that the Scindasgu is gone. I could use some help for a bit to coax the animals and magical critters back to the forest. Not a real forest without critters- or magic you know.”

“I think Derek and I could stay for a bit to help,” Jenna sighed.

“I’ll stay,” Jack said, “if Jenna let’s me.”

“We’ll see,” she grinned.

The village threw a feast for the three heroes. The little town was ablaze with colorful paper lanterns and banners.

Derek cast colorful balls of magic into the air to brighten the night’s festivities. The mayor and the people were happy. Meg was drunk.

Jenna wore her blue velvet gown, as her mother predicted. She strolled down the street, sipping the potent ale.

“I’d be careful,” Jack remarked. “That brew packs a kick. Remember Derek’s hangover?”

Jack had shaved and looked dashing in his clean leathers and crisp linen shirt.

“I can handle it,” she said.

“Do you forgive me for being a village idiot?” Jack asked.

“Perhaps,” she said softly.

Jack held her close and whispered, “If I kiss you, will you turn me into a toad?”

“Only if you kiss me badly,” she laughed.

They kissed, briefly but with heat until a raven messenger cawed and interrupted their moment. It landed at Jenna’s feet, a tiny scroll tied to its knobby leg. The raven looked up at her with familiar eyes.

“I think I’m being summoned to another magical duty,” Jenna said.

Jack grinned. “A witch and warrior can make a good team. Need some company?”

Jenna took his arm and said, “Magic and steel? Perhaps the two can work together after all.”

THE END

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