

SONGS FROM THE WOOD**BY****TERRI NIXON**

*“Let me bring you songs from the wood,
To make you feel much better than you could know ...”*

Ian Anderson

She watched them through the flickering, dancing flames, wondering if she should have trusted her instincts and told Marten what she suspected.

Bringing her bottle to her lips she tipped it, savouring the cold, clean taste of the wine without taking her eyes off the two men on the far side of the fire. They paid her no attention of course; to them she was simply another new age freak, playing at saving the planet ... another pain in the ass to be dealt with before they moved on with their sullen, weary little lives.

This site had sprung up just two weeks ago. Midway through a bypass protest at a spot known as Briar’s Ride, Skovia had received a call from her old friend and ex-lover Marten, who was for once not trying to talk her into seeing him again, but delivering the shocking news that a large section of the ancient and beautiful Gatesby wood was being flattened to extend the neighbouring holiday flatlets. Those square, ungainly, ice-cream coloured boxes had already crept up to the woodland’s edge in a few well-planned and discreet moves, and it was purely by chance that Marten had heard of the scheduled destruction. He had gathered his most loyal supporters, pulling his best from Briar’s Ride, and set up at the only vehicular access to the wood,

effectively blocking the entry route of the developers.

They were old hands at this, and knew that any delay they could force could only be beneficial. In fact because of their involvement, the locals had become aware that they were in danger of losing their woods, and had sent petitions and letters to the planning offices in the thousands. It had all gone almost too well, and Skovia was reluctant to relax, she wasn't used to such an easy victory. But she accepted that the cessation of angry protests from the developers was a good sign that alternatives were being investigated, such as the land belonging to the developer himself, which also flanked the holiday village. Maybe he'd scotched his plans for a golf course in his grounds after all.

Gradually she began to enjoy the feeling of victory spreading through the camp, she even found time to chat with Vesta, a girl she normally found as irritatingly vacant as an empty wine bottle. With long, wavy hair, a petite figure and wide blue eyes, Vesta charmed almost everyone she met on first meeting, but most people soon grew bored and wandered away.

Today Skovia had made an effort, determined to subdue her negative opinion of the girl, and find something worthwhile there. After all, she cared about the environment, she couldn't be all bad. After ten minutes she found her teeth beginning to itch in response to Vesta's incessant, bland chatter, and had looked around for an escape. Pleading extreme tiredness she had taken an afternoon nap, crawling out of her tent as the sky began to darken and the air grew chillier. The first thing she had seen had been Marten talking to two men she had never seen before.

The elder of the two stood slightly back, his eyes casting around the gathering with quick movements, as if searching out someone in particular. The younger man was laughing with Marten as if they were old friends, but Skovia had never seen him

before; even from this distance she knew he was someone she'd have remembered.

He sat on the high wooden fence that separated the car park from the woodland path, his hands hanging casually between his knees, his sweater sleeves almost reaching his knuckles. The jeans he wore had large holes at the knee, and his engineer boots looked scuffed and comfortable. He looked completely at home here, which was more than could be said for his companion, who also wore ripped jeans, but the look was too obviously contrived. As Skovia approached, Marten turned to greet her and the young man slid off the fence with easy grace.

"Hello there," he said. The Irish heritage she had guessed at from his black hair and vivid blue eyes was confirmed in his accent, and his grip was firm and cool as she shook his hand.

"Skovia's my soulmate, alas she doesn't know it," Marten explained with an exaggerated pout.

"I must be in denial," Skovia agreed. "You will let me know when I come out of it, won't you?" The three of them smiled and, eager to join in, the older man held out his hand,

"Hi, I'm Bran," he announced.

Skovia felt a resurgence of her initial mistrust, and her smile faded. "Are you really?" she asked. "Is that as in flakes or sultana?"

The other two chuckled at her innocent tone, but Bran bristled slightly.

"It's *Celtic*," he explained with exaggerated patience.

"I *know* it is," Skovia matched his tone, "and if you're Celtic, I'm a bowl of porridge."

Bran scowled. "I call myself Bran," he amended, his own Irish accent becoming much clearer in his irritation, "in much the same way as many of us change our names

when we learn where our true roots lie.”

“Roots, my arse,” Skovia said mildly, and turned to the younger man, who was biting his lip to keep from laughing again. “And I suppose you’re Merlin, or Taliesin, or Grizzly Adams, fighter for the rights of the Oppressed Bear?”

“Nope, Declan it was, is now and evermore shall be,” he told her firmly. He let his eyes drift over her with lazy interest, but instead of giving in to the temptation to return the scrutiny, Skovia called out to her best friend who had emerged from the large tent at the far end of the clearing.

“Charis, this is Declan and Brian,” she said. This time Declan’s laughter would not be held in. Charis shook the fiercely blushing Bran’s hand and then Declan’s, her expression easy to read as she stared up at the attractive newcomer.

“Actually, I was just coming to look for you, we’re needed over at the food tent,” she told Skovia, her eyes still fixed on the Irishman. The two of them left, smiling politely to excuse themselves. As soon as they were out of sight however, Skovia’s smile slipped.

“They’re all wrong, Charis, “ she muttered. “I don’t like them one bit.”

“Not even Declan?” asked Charis slyly, but Skovia remained grim.

“Not even Declan.”

Charis frowned. “You think they’re spies?”

“From the developers? Yeah, I do.”

“Well it would make sense for them to put someone in the camp,” Charis allowed. “It’d benefit them no end to find out where our weakest points are.”

“No wonder Wilson’s gone quiet.” Skovia’s tone was filled with dull dislike at the mention of the developer. “He’s gone and put a spy in just when we’re likely to be relaxing and letting our guard down. Clever bastard. And I don’t mean that in a good

way,” she added as she glanced over her shoulder again at the two newcomers.

Passing through the opening to the food tent to do her share of the preparations for the evening meal, she tried to put the niggling suspicions from her mind.

She couldn't.

And now, on the night of what should have been their triumph, she felt hollow.

Nervous. The wine made little difference to the tension she felt although the atmosphere was easy and comfortable. The group members who weren't on duty had eaten their communal meal and were sitting around their fire, conversation a low, pleasant murmur, a few of the younger lads kicking the burning logs to send sparks spitting into the darkness above; spiralling snakes of bright gold fizzing up and away into the night. And those bastards over there joining in, like they cared for real.

As if.

Skovia's heart twisted at the thought of the majesty that would be destroyed if the developers had their way. How many hundreds of years had these trees stood here, giving life to the planet and hope to its people? How many thousands of people had stood beneath a tree, any tree and looked up into its graceful branches, losing themselves for just a moment in the beauty that was there for the taking? Few could remain unmoved. And soon those same people would be coming to stay in these disgusting, square holiday flats, looking out on what little remained of the forest and exclaiming at its beauty. Where they sat rubbing oil into their sweaty skin, where they put their huge rubbish containers, where they ripped holes to erect their swingballs and sunshades – that ground would be the woodland's graveyard, but no stone markers erected to its memory, just row upon row of neat, gaily painted wooden huts.

Skovia looked up sharply as laughter rose from the far side of the fire. As if it had been directed mockingly at her sorrowing thoughts the sound had cut into them,

scattering them along with the fine showers of sparks that shot upward each time a log shifted. Her movement caused the two men directly opposite to turn their attention on her for a moment, and she saw Declan widen his eyes in surprise, before looking away quickly. She knew why he had reacted that way, and she felt herself flush miserably. She had known for a long time that there was something wrong with her, something different. No-one had been able to describe it clearly to her, not even her closest friends. It was just something in her expression sometimes, a strange quality of the light, reflected in a unique way.

“It’s just kind of ... weird, Skovia,” Charis had told her once, many years ago. “You get this look like – you’re someone else, but still you. Like your *eyes* belong to someone else ... oh bugger, I can’t explain it.”

It puzzled and upset Skovia whenever she was at a low ebb, although most of the time she was able to push it to the back of her mind; there were more important things after all. She sighed and shook her head; time for soul-searching when this wood, at least, was safe. She resolved to see Marten and challenge him as to why he had so casually accepted these two unknown elements into this security-conscious group.

The following morning she did just that. Marten had been deep in conversation with Declan, and Skovia waited until the Irishman had left for breakfast, then caught Marten’s arm as he turned to go into his own tent.

“What are they doing here?” she asked bluntly.

Marten sighed. “Something told me you weren’t sure about them,” he admitted, his tone weighted with sarcasm. “What was it now? Oh yeah, your being *unforgivably* rude to Bran.”

“You laughed at the time,” she pointed out.

“I know. It was still rude though.” He frowned. “What’s your beef with them anyway?”

“I want to know where you know them from, and what makes you so sure they’re not feeding Wilson information? I mean, funny how they turn up now, when all’s gone quiet, don’t you think?”

“Look, Declan’s hot from the site at Briar’s Ride, joined there right after you left, and Bran is a good friend of his. He trusts him, that’s good enough for me.”

“Briar’s Ride’s all sorted now?”

“Yeah, thanks to Declan as it goes. Sorted it in about three days flat. And besides, who do you think told me about this development in the first place?”

“How should I know, you wouldn’t tell me,” Skovia felt stupid and elated at the same time. She was annoyed with Marten for not giving her all the information, but the knowledge that Declan was on the level gave her a buzz she could no longer ignore. And what was more, she was sure he had displayed an interest that matched hers. A memory flashed through her mind of the way he had looked last night when he had witnessed that strange light in her eyes, but she determinedly pushed it to one side; with luck he had already written it off as a reflection of the firelight.

Skovia's spirits were lighter than they had been for days, and when she saw Bran leaning morosely against the fence shortly after lunch she decided she had been unfair to him, and strove to make amends.

"Hi, Bran," she said touching him lightly on the arm. He stared at her dully for a moment, then nodded.

"Skovia." His tone was perfunctory, less a greeting than a statement of recognition.

"Um, I think I owe you an apology," she battled on. "I had my doubts about you and Declan when you arrived, and it seems I was wrong."

"Didn't seem to have doubts about Declan," he pointed out. "But then he's a whole different kettle of fish now, isn't he?"

"What do you mean?" She could hear the blush in the way her voice thickened, didn't need to feel the warmth across her cheeks.

"Oh, come on. He's got a pretty face and a bucketful of blarney. No-one ever questions him, least of all impressionable young girls like yerself." He turned away again, staring out over the landscape and Skovia felt a rush of annoyance. Couldn't he even accept a genuine apology with good grace?

"Look, I made a mistake and I'm sorry," she told him stiffly. "I hope you accept that, but if you don't, well that's your loss. Fester if you like, makes no difference to me." She turned away, but halted as he spoke again, his voice carrying no inflection, but his words evidently designed to bite.

"You'll be wasting your time running after him anyway, you know." Before she could deny running after anyone, he carried on. "He's here to catch up with his old girlfriend, you know the one - Vesta? Oh yes," he continued as she turned back, "she's a lovely girl and no mistake. Sure, don't they make a handsome couple?"

Skovia smiled brightly. "Oh, yes, absolutely *gorgeous*, Vesta is. Hope that's enough for him, but it seems as if he likes hanging around with the intellectually challenged, so they'll probably be extremely happy."

With her smile fixed in place, Skovia went in search of Charis and found her drinking a cup of treacle-black coffee, her face grey in the early afternoon light.

“Still hungover?”

“Oh, God – it’s that homemade stuff that Marten dragged out here with him,” Charis groaned. “Blows your socks off, but it’s finding them again the next day that’s the problem!” She peered closely at Skovia.

“You look as though you’re sucking a lemon and talking to the Queen,” she said. “What on earth’s that sickly smile for?”

“Just keeping a *happy* face on for the *happy* couple,” Skovia said with brittle humour. At Charis’s blank expression she recounted her conversation with Bran, and held up a hand to stay the comment she knew would be forthcoming.

“I know, it’s dead corny; me falling for the one I can’t have, the handsome stranger, the mysterious Irishman, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera,” she grumbled. “Can’t help it though, can I?”

“Can’t blame you, actually,” Charis admitted. “And I think, from the way he was looking at you last night by the fire, you have nothing to worry about. Vesta’s so ... so ... God, she’s pathetic. She’d be better off with Bland Bran. “Hey, isn’t Vesta a brand name for packet curry? Blimey – curry and Bran together, the toilets’ll have a nervous breakdown!”

The girls’ laughter echoed around the campsite, and Skovia’s mood rose once more; Charis might be right about Declan after all.

Late in the afternoon Skovia and Charis walked deep into the wood to carry out their duties, checking out the farthest boundaries to ensure no-one had managed to break through the fences to begin the destruction from an unexpected angle. Although it was still daylight, the weakening sun struggled through the dense treetops, and the

shadows darted across the path as the light September wind briefly parted branches. Skovia and Charis satisfied themselves that no breach of the boundaries had occurred, and started to make their way back.

“Just a sec,” Charis told her, indicating the undergrowth at the side of the path

“Too much coffee?” Skovia asked with a grin, Charis pulled a face and made her way into the shadows, dry twigs breaking under her boots. Skovia waited patiently for a minute, then a mischievous grin tugged at her lips and she moved off to the side of the path herself, intending to sneak up on Charis and make her jump. She stepped more carefully than her friend had, lifting her long skirt high above her knees and placing her heavy boots carefully to avoid crunching. Watching her feet, she judged when she had gone the same distance as Charis, then looked up to place her whereabouts.

To her uneasy surprise she found that she had come the wrong way, and that the trees here were subtly different from the ones she had seen just a moment ago. Darker, taller, more densely placed – for a moment her unease grew, but as she reached out to steady herself on the gnarled trunk of the nearest giant she felt a calm stealing through her, as if it had planted itself in the center of her stomach and was growing outwards from her core, warming every part of her with a fine, silver thread that mingled with her blood.

Skovia took a deep, slightly shaky breath, and as she let it out it was accompanied by a peaceful sigh. She stared at the place where her hand lay on the tree trunk, its human delicacy suddenly seeming as ageless and strong as the ancient wood upon which it lay. As she watched, it seemed to be growing grow paler and paler until she could clearly see the wood through it, but she felt no sense of fear. She watched, deadly still, until her hand disappeared completely and it wasn't until she flexed her

fingers that she knew for sure it was still there. Shadows flitting briefly across the tree trunk told her that her hand still had substance and, wonderingly, she moved closer, laying her arm along the trunk. Where her skin was bare it seemed to fuse with the wood, only her sleeve showed clearly.

A tingling sensation started at the base of her skull, and without knowing precisely why, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around the tree, pressing her face to its rough ridges and gnarls, feeling herself gliding inward, becoming closer than should have been physically possible.

She drew another deep breath and the air was sweeter and fresher than any she had breathed ... where? Outside? Skovia remained very still as she continued to explore with her senses. She could hear Charis somewhere out there, tripping over a root or stone, cursing under her breath – she could even hear her breathing. She heard the sounds she had not been hearing before; insects buzzing, breezes rippling through the grasses, light singing ... birdsong? No, someone else – in the distance, a human voice.

Abruptly Skovia looked to the side, her face still pressed tightly against the tree but no longer feeling its roughness, only smelling the earthy, woody smell, the tang of sap, the gentlest brush of the air as it breathed past her. She saw others; shadows becoming faces, features becoming sharper, clearer as her vision adjusted, and then she heard them. The singing was them; the wood sprites – tree faeries, lithe and beautiful creatures who sang on and on, reaching out to her.

Moving away from her tree, she held out a trembling hand and felt it touched with warmth and gentleness, felt a great flow of strength from the contact, and as tears spilled onto her cheeks she felt the whisper-touch of tenderness as they were brushed away.

Then the sound of Charis calling her. Skovia felt a great hollowness open up inside her as the warmth of the wood sprites withdrew, but looking at them she understood – there was pain and pleading in those exquisite faces. She looked down at her hands again, saw her own pale, faintly freckled skin, the nails short and bitten, earth staining the cuticles. She looked around her at the trees, once again the same as all the others she had seen, nothing mysterious about them.

As the magic of the experience receded, her vision and hearing returned to normal and she looked up to see Charis, beckoning her from the path.

“See? You take the piss out of me, but you’re just as bad, sloping off for a sly one!” her friend was laughing. Skovia stared at her for a moment, then blurted out,

“We can’t let them do it, Charis!”

“What?”

“We can’t let them destroy this place, we just can’t!”

“I know that, but ...”

“No! You don’t understand, and you might not even if I told you – but ... oh, God, we’ve got to stop them.”

Without explaining further, Skovia led the way back to the encampment, feeling the questions burning in the air between herself and Charis, hoping they would remain unasked, at least for now. Luckily her friend seemed to understand and as they walked at Skovia’s new and urgent pace, they didn’t speak further.

They were almost at the place near the edge of the wood, where the paths forked, one leading back into the woodland by a roundabout path, the other to the camp, when Skovia saw the fleeting shadow out of the corner of her eye. Her head whipped around and her eyes focused immediately, unerringly, on the figure the distance – Declan was moving swiftly and silently along the parallel path, heading for the fork.

He hadn't seen them and Skovia put a hand on Charis's shoulder and pointed, bringing her finger to her lips at the same time. Charis had already seen him; she had noticed Skovia's sudden movement and followed her line of sight.

"What the bloody hell was he doing in there alone?" she demanded in a hot whisper.

"Proving me right," Skovia answered, her tone grim. Her whole being seemed to shrivel with disappointment.

"So he's out to sabotage our efforts," Charis muttered angrily.

"Sabotage *our* sabotage, yes," pointed out Skovia, the irony not lost on her. Charis shrugged.

"At least we're doing it for the right reasons," she said. Skovia nodded, remembering the pain and loss she had seen on the faces of the creatures deep in the wood. She turned to Charis, wondering if she should try to explain, but no matter how far back their friendship went, this was too big to simply blurt out without having had time to think it through. The feeling of calm remained with her as she stood in the cool, green shelter of the trees, but she could see past the wood's edge now, to the bright, sunlit gathering, the raised voices, anger and laughter mingling from different parts of the encampment, and the mere sight of it made her almost unbearably tense.

"We've got to tell Marten now," Charis told her urgently. "Declan must have been in there searching out somewhere for the 'dozers to break through!"

"He won't believe us, but we'll have to try," agreed Skovia.

They hurried back to the camp, and as they left the shadows thrown down by the huge trees, Skovia felt an almost physical urge to turn back, but she saw Marten in the distance, and Declan on the other side of the camp.

"Look, you go and tell Marten you think the new guys are out to screw us. He

already knows I think that so he'll just ignore me. I'll go and collar Declan before he finds his playmate."

Leaving Charis to explain to Marten, Skovia hurried across the flattened grass to where Declan was looking for Bran.

"So, have a nice time today?" she asked him. As he turned to her she took an involuntary step back ... something blazed in his eyes that dried the words in her mouth. Then it was gone, and he inclined his head.

"Sorry?" he asked. Skovia swallowed hard and started again, realising it was the reflection of the sun on the unusually vivid blue that had seared her senses for a moment, nothing more.

"If I were you I wouldn't bother telling your friend about anything you might have seen in the woods today, even if it's exactly what you're looking for," she told him.

"And how would you know if I found anything?"

"Look, I know what you're here for, and even if Marten can't see it, it's bloody obvious to me," Skovia said. "For the record, most of the guys here are peace-loving, live-and-let-live individuals, but it's only fair to tell you that some of them came late to this calling and have somewhat dodgy histories."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning if word gets out that you've screwed us over, they might *forget* that they're now peace-loving, live-and-let-live individuals."

"And?"

"God, do I have to spell it out?" Skovia snapped, exasperated.

"No you don't, but it's fun trying to watch you tell me without actually *using* the words; 'kick' and 'shit out of you'," Declan grinned and Skovia was mortified to find an answering smile fighting with her determinedly deadpan expression. She narrowed

her eyes and turned away, leaving him to think about what she'd said, but as she started to cross the field again she felt movement behind her and his hand on her arm.

“Look, I know what you're saying, and you needn't worry,” he said quietly, seriously. She tried not to dwell on the sensual feeling of his breath brushing her skin. “I'm not here to ‘screw you over,’ as you so delightfully put it.”

A pause. He had almost convinced her, but ...

“Bollocks!” Skovia jerked her arm away from his grip and, walking backwards so he could see that she was unmoved, she told him in a tight voice: “We'll all know where to look when the crap hits the fan, just don't say you weren't warned.” Before she turned away she saw him staring after her, and the part of her that wanted to believe him threatened to take over.

He stood by the fence; tall, slender, graceful, his dark hair lifting in the wind, and his jaw tight with anger. A man's physical appeal had never pulled her so strongly and Skovia wanted more than anything to believe that he wasn't who he seemed to be. She could hardly believe she was allowing herself to be swayed by nothing more than charm and a pretty face, but the way she was feeling was undeniable, to herself if to no-one else. Women! She thought with a mixture of disgust and embarrassment.

Even worse, as she took one last look back she saw Vesta approaching him, her walk deliberately sinuous, her long hair hanging seductively over one shoulder. Skovia's stomach lurched as she watched Declan reach out, taking her hand and bringing it to his lips in a show of old fashioned chivalry that brought a giggle sailing through the air, stinging Skovia's heart.

Within the forest, songs echoed among the trees, sung by lilting voices of such

erie beauty that any human listening could not help but be intrigued and transported by the sound. But the song was weak, and when the singing stopped the others would wake; the Oakies. A cold, bloodthirsty race they were – sleeping their deep, enchanted sleep while the forest grew and thrived around them.

Only their slumber kept them from rising up and destroying their enemy; the Tree Sprites; only the songs kept them locked in their slumber.

The developers had received from their spy the information they needed to break through the barriers and destroy the forest.

The terrified fairies continued to sing.

But the song was weak ...

All through the afternoon and evening, Skovia watched Declan and Vesta huddled together, smiling at each other, their hands casually touching, and it became clear that they had indeed known each other before now. Bran too, hung around the two of them, nodding with approval every time Vesta opened her pretty, pouting mouth and made some comment. It was pathetic to watch, but Skovia couldn't find it in her to feel sorry for him, he was as much an intruder as Declan was, although it was clear who was in charge; Bran would never pass off as a natural without Declan to lead the way. It wasn't surprising that Vesta hadn't worked it out either; her brain and Bran's combined might just provide enough thinking power to lace a pair of shoes, but that was it.

Skovia hated herself for wasting time thinking about it, and put all her energy into trying to persuade Marten that his so-called friends weren't all they appeared to be. He would not be moved, however, and Skovia felt her tension rising, tight with the

frustration of it all. The heat of the day remained into the evening despite the growing darkness, and all she could think about was the peace she had found deep within the wood, hearing the songs of the wood sprites, letting the calm spread through her until she could breathe easily again. With the sudden urgency building like a physical pressure in her chest she left the campsite, and walked thankfully into the cool green shelter of the forest.

After twenty minutes she arrived at the place where she had wandered off the path just this afternoon. It was now almost full dark, and the undergrowth was treacherous with its snaking roots and blade-sharp grasses, still she plunged into the trees, hungry to feel again the peace she had experienced, to hear the songs and to embrace the singers.

Oh, God – nothing!

Searching for the place she had found before, she felt a great loss well up in her, tears sprang to her eyes as she stared around frantically, putting her hands on the nearest trees with wordless little cries of desperation. It was like a physical addiction; the thought of leaving the woodland without claiming that soul-deep peace for herself once more was more than she could bear. The tightness inside her was met with a sudden sense of increasing pressure from all around, a rising awareness of the crushing weight of the trees...and of the fragility of life. She knew that finding the songs again would ease it, but there was nothing.

Sobbing under her breath, she stumbled in panic from tree to towering tree, reaching out, grasping, touching, pleading ...

Nothing.

Declan was becoming equally frantic. Where was she? Unknowingly echoing the movements of the object of his search, he went from person to person at the campsite, cursing himself for letting Skovia out of his sight for the briefest of moments. He found Charis sitting by the fire and, forcing himself to appear casual, he knelt down beside her.

“So, where’s your feisty pal tonight?” he asked taking the bottle she was drinking from and saluting her with it before drinking. Charis shrugged.

“Dunno, she went for a walk I think,” her tone was colder than Declan had expected, and he looked at her closely.

“Hey,” he said, “I know what you think about us being here, but it’s not the case, I promise you that.”

“You say.” She took the bottle back from him abruptly.

“I do. Look, this is really important, where would Skovia go for a walk?”

She cast a look towards the forest and he stared in that direction, horror striking him harder than he had imagined possible.

“She wouldn’t! Not this time of night, for Chrissake?” He rocked back onto his feet and without another word sprinted off in search of Bran.

He found him sitting in the corner of the field, searching amongst the long grasses. He looked up as Declan approached, his expression its usual blank and bored mask.

“I lost my watch,” he began, but Declan interrupted.

“We’re alone, Bran,” he snapped. Instantly Bran rose to his feet; leaner, tougher, even taller than he had previously. His eyes came into sharp focus and he glared keenly at Declan. This transformation, subtle as it was, always took Declan by surprise but he reached out and seized Bran’s arm, urgency taking away the

wonderment.

“She’s gone into the woods,” he rasped. “We’ve got to get her back, it’s gone too far this time, we’re too late ... I think the singing has stopped.”

“Where’s Vesta?” Bran demanded, his own hand folding over Declan’s and squeezing hard.

“Gone to her father. That’s what I mean, we’ve failed this time; there are no more songs, the Oakies will wake. It’s over! The forest is lost and thanks to us, Skovia’s in danger.”

Bran’s eyes clouded over, defeated.

“This has happened countless times, We did our best.”

“But what about Skovia?” Declan was almost screaming now, but Bran’s hand on his tightened so painfully that his shout was cut off in a grunt as he tried to prise off the long, hard fingers.

“A sacrifice is needed, Declan, that’s the only hope we have, all that’ll appease them. It’ll buy us some time.”

“No!” Declan jerked his arm away and backed away from Bran, his own eyes were burning now, he could feel it, but it wasn’t anger, or any of the Faery magic shining through him this time; this was a loss of such gut-wrenching power that he was shaking from the force of it. The burning was the unaccustomed sting of tears.

“She’s one of us, Bran,” he said, his voice trembling. His head ached with the need to run headlong into the forest and drag Skovia to safety. “I’m going to get her.” He started away towards the wood but this time it was Bran’s turn to shout and, ignoring the looks of interest from the closest of the group members he ran after Declan and dragged him around.

“We *are* special, yes,” he hissed. “But we’re not bloody immortal! Where’s the

sense in putting yourself in danger too? And if, as you say, that girl is one of us, then she'll be alright. She'll know what to do.”

“But she doesn't know!” Declan bit back, feeling the anger blazing through him. “She's like I was before you told me, knowing there's something different, knowing she's different, but not understanding how, or why. The Oakies'll take her, and they'll kill her ...” He broke away again and, without looking back to see if Bran was following, he plunged into the forest, his feet making no sound as they flew unerringly over bramble-strewn paths and over fallen logs, darkness no barrier.

After running easily for half an hour Declan paused by one of the larger trees, and felt his blood run cooler in his veins as a hand laid on the trunk confirmed his fears; there was no singing. As he stood there, trying to sense Skovia's whereabouts, he felt his eardrums boom with the sudden increase in pressure around him. His chest began to ache and he felt almost as if some unseen creature had fastened sinewy fingers around his throat. They were not squeezing yet, but the threat was there; his physical body was not strong enough to withstand the consequences of the Oakies waking, demanding their blood-price.

The more the pressure built, the sooner they would awaken from their enchanted sleep, Declan knew he had to make the singing start again, somehow ease the build up of energy that would rouse the slumbering Oakie spirits. And oh, God – where was Skovia? Declan began searching again, this time his movements were laboured and slow, he lurched from tree to tree, fighting the pain as it threatened to bring him to his knees. The forest was burning with invisible flames, suffering as the pressure increased, and now the invisible fingers on his throat had begun to tighten and even breathing was painful and difficult. Dimly he wondered what use he would be to Skovia even if he found her.

Into the glowing red torment of his mind, his mistakes screamed at him as he stumbled through the wood; coming to the site to spy out Vesta, confirming that she was the one passing information to the developer – her father; not realising right away that Skovia was of the same, part faery heritage that he himself had been born to; letting Skovia out of his sight, letting her go on believing that he and Vesta were close. What had that been – some kind of punishment for not believing him? He had been so angry at her refusal to listen, and now she was gone and she didn't know that she was the one who made his heart beat, that she was the one keeping him alive even now as the urge to collapse and accept this onrushing death was taking hold of him, pulling him down.

He had to find her...

Skovia sagged against the huge tree, her eyes closed against the pain in her head, her arms across her body, hugging herself as tears streamed down her cheeks and the terror of what she couldn't see gripped her. All around her were whisperings and low, hollow murmurs, but no singing. She sensed that the singing was what had been keeping these spirits at bay, and now that it had stopped something had happened within the forest ... something beyond the realm of her imagining.

She turned to the tree, sliding her arms around its massive trunk, still hoping for a miracle, but as she rested her cheek against the gnarled trunk she felt herself grabbed and jerked roughly forwards. She gasped and pulled back, but it was too late; she remained locked to the tree, pinned there, unable to move. Her head filled with demonic laughter and she felt tiny, clawlike hands roaming over her body, clambering up her back, hanging off the back of her long skirt and even tugging at the tops of her

boots.

“This one, yes, this one will suffice. Pretty, she is, strong, she is ... a fine piece. You are forgiven for waking us, Tree Sprites ... we'll take this one. You'll sing once more, yes? When she is ours, you'll sing and you'll sing and you'll sing. And we will sleep again ...”

Skovia was shaking uncontrollably, her arms and legs jerking wildly against the rough tree trunk, the skin abrading from them, rubbing her knees and inner arms raw. She tried to scream but her cheek was pressed too hard against the tree to allow her to open her mouth, and the most she could manage was a terrified grunting sound that carried no further than three feet into the dense woodland.

She tried to calm herself, to focus on the wild beating of her heart and force it to slow down. Closing her eyes tightly, she reached for an image and there, shimmering into view at the edges of her consciousness; a black-haired Irishman, startling blue eyes no longer laughing but dark with fear, searching for something as he moved swiftly through the undergrowth, his mouth working, crying out words she couldn't hear.

As her mind played out this vision she saw him stumble, falling to his knees, his hands folded across his chest as if fending off some unseen enemy. Her own lips formed his name, breathing it into the wood that she held, her heart tight with the fear that he was dying. In her mind he remained hunched over, but with difficulty he raised his head as if he were hearing her. She spoke his name again and he let his arms fall away from his body, straightening up, his head held high and his eyes suddenly blazing with the fiercest light she had ever seen. He opened his mouth.

A moment later she heard the sweetest singing flooding through the forest, felt it humming in the tree under her raw and bleeding arms, recognised the voice as the one

she had heard the most clearly when she had first become one with the woodland. The recognition came as sweet pain to her as she realised that Declan was the one who had brushed her tears away, who had tried to convey the loss and fear the sprites were suffering. She had seen Declan running back to the camp and assumed he had been spying, when all along he had been holding her, singing to her, singing life into the wood.

The clawing, grabbing fingers melted away from Skovia's body and she pushed herself away from the tree, swaying on her feet. Narrow bands of light crept into her vision, destroying the images to which she had clung to sustain her fragile serenity. The ground tilted and with a small sigh of defeat she let go and sank into the dazzling lights. As if in a waking dream she felt herself being lifted up into the air ... something was carrying her with hands she couldn't feel. The lights dimmed and became fuzzy clouds of deepest velvet black, creeping inwards upon the brilliance until only the tiniest dot was left in the centre of her consciousness. Skovia allowed that tiny light to wink out and then there was nothing.

When she awoke, the pressure was still heavy on her chest, but she was lying on the ground. The man peering down at was familiar and yet different; a strangely beautiful light in his eyes, something ethereal about his appearance despite the toughness.

"Bran?" she whispered. He put a lean hand on her brow and told her to be still, and with a frightening jolt she realised that he was not speaking her language, yet she understood him. She nodded mutely and he smiled, his face altering again, so that in her eyes he was every bit as beloved as her own family.

"Declan was right, you're one of us," he told her, still in that strange tongue. She tried to think about what he was saying, but her weariness descended once more and

she closed her eyes, only to be shaken gently awake again.

“Skovia,” the name sounded natural and perfect in this lilting accent, but Bran’s expression was tight and worried. “Where is Declan? He left to find you, but I haven’t seen him.”

“I don’t know, he sang the demons away ... or, or was that a dream? Bran, what’s happening, is it over?” Skovia’s voice grew stronger and she raised herself on her elbows, wincing at the sting as the abrasions on her arms moved against the ground.

“Not yet; the singing hasn’t started again. Declan found you in his heart from wherever he is, and he had enough strength left to help you, but where are the others? Until they carry on the song we’re all in danger. Declan more so than any of us if he’s alone out there.”

Confusion swept across Skovia’s mind again, but the one fact registered firmly enough to bring her to her feet, holding on to Bran as dizziness threatened to overwhelm her.

Together they walked away from the clearing and Bran talked. He told of the two groups of faeries, locked in lifelong battle for the forest, of the enchanted sleep under which the Oakies had fallen after they had developed their bloodlust – of the demand to satisfy that craving which now kept them from their slumber.

“If they’re sated, the songs will send them back to their sleep and the forest will be safe from them, if not they’ll rise up and destroy us all. We’ll be their sustenance until we are wiped out. And after that, whoever ventures into the woods will be in mortal danger. Sooner let the place be pulled down for the developers. You’d never believe how many forests we’ve already lost to the Oakies.”

“And I was to be their first sacrifice here,” Skovia muttered. Although she had

sensed it, still the shock reverberated through her, making her teeth chatter. “How can we stop them?”

“Give them a more deserving victim,” Bran said, anger lacing his voice, momentarily overcoming his worry for Declan.”

Skovia looked at him, realising belatedly that she could see as well as if it were daylight, despite the blackness that enveloped them. He was staring fixedly ahead, only his eyes flicked from right to left, peering through the tangled undergrowth.

“More deserving? Who?”

“Vesta.”

Skovia stopped dead, her heart clutched cold.

“You want to kill Vesta?”

“I have given them Vesta,” he told her. “She was the one who started all this. She gave information about your weak points to her father – her father is Gareth Wilson.”

“Wilson? The developer?”

“Correct. She almost gave him Briar’s Ride until Declan stepped in. Now she’s given them Gatesby Wood. It was due to be destroyed tomorrow. It was that fear which caused the Wood Sprites to stop singing, and in turn woke the Oakies.”

“And now?”

“And now with Vesta gone, her father will put his plans on hold and the fairies, my people, are safe again. For now. But why have they not begun to sing? I don’t understand ... if Declan is out there, the Oakies will find him – and a half-faery is a grand prize indeed. As you would have been.”

“I’m one too? And you?”

“I’m full faery, but Declan’s mother is mortal.”

Skovia was still reeling from the information that she was half faery and almost missed the implication of what he had said. But before she could respond, he stopped at the foot of a tree and put his hands out, laying them on the trunk.

“I will give them myself before I let them take my son,” he whispered. Skovia blinked hard and abruptly turned away from him, pushing her way further into the forest, aware of him travelling, fleet-footed beside her. The Oakies were near, she could feel them, she closed her eyes and now she could feel hot, huffing little breaths close to her face. Then she saw ...

Declan, bound by vines and thistles to a huge, ancient oak tree, surrounded by silently capering creatures of semi-transparent brown. As lovely to look upon as the Wood Sprites, and yet somehow oozing evil in every graceful movement, they turned wild eyes upon their victim and laughed. Their beauty seemed obscene, their elegance coarse, and their ethereal grace as foul as a slow moving river of slime, cutting through the fresh green of the forest.

Full-sized yet barely visible, they moved around Declan, clawing and ripping at his clothing. But he was mercifully oblivious, his head rolled onto one shoulder, his eyes closed.

Bran’s voice cut through her consciousness. “You know what you must do!” Skovia stared at him, everything seemed to fade away, even the horrific scene before her, and she turned her mind inwards, reaching out with all the energy she had left, until she heard it. A song. A quiet, distant, hesitant song, growing in strength as she focused on it, until it filled her head and her heart. She opened her eyes again.

The Oakies were gone and, as she watched, she saw the last of them melting into the nearby trees, vanishing against them as she had seen her own hand do a lifetime ago.

She became aware that her mouth was open, and that the rich, beautiful sound was coming from her own throat. She had sung the Oakies back to sleep. She had reached into her deepest memories, memories she hadn't known she possessed, and found the song there. Gradually other voices had joined her and she could see the faeries now, smiling on her with warmth, love and gratitude as Bran lifted Declan down and laid him upon the ground with the tenderness only a parent can feel. Skovia knelt next to him, placing her hand on his chest and singing life into his still body, until he opened his eyes once more. They fixed on her, and she saw pain give way to relief.

"It's over," Skovia told him.

He drew a shaky breath. "But not forever."

"No, nothing's forever. But it's enough."

He nodded and closed his eyes, his hand finding hers.

The Wood Fairies carried the song on into the forest, bells in the sunshine and the heartbeat of the trees.

The Oakies slept.

For now.

THE END.

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