

He's curled in a ball, shivering, under a piercing white moon. He'd forgotten how bright the moon was, how its light could go right through a man, cold in his bones, searching out what was hidden deep. Go away, he breathes, arms up over his head, knees to his chest, trying to be invisible. Leave me alone. But the light seeks him out, finding a way through the high canopy of the beeches, through the rough blanket of bracken and fern he's scrambled together, through the rags of his clothing, right inside him. Into his mind, tangling his thoughts. Into his heart, probing his wounds. It's been so long. How long has it been? How long has he been away?

An owl cries, eerie, hollow. In the undergrowth, something screams. Something dies. Stop, he whispers. Don't. But nobody's listening. His words fall into the quiet of the night forest and are lost. He's lost. The cold moon will kill him before he can find his way. The way back to . . . to . . .

A fragment comes to him, then it's gone. Another piece, and another. A story . . . but the meaning slips away before he can grasp it. Shivering body. Clattering teeth. A man . . . A man building . . . A man making a house, a strange house . . . He can feel the wood under his hands, his crooked hands . . . Long ago, so long ago . . . Was there a rhyme for the building, a charm, a spell? Crooked hands. Crooked yew. He makes the words with his lips, but there is no sound. Blackthorn, ivy and crooked yew.

He can't remember much. But what he remembers is enough, for now. Enough to keep his heart beating; enough to keep him breathing through the cold night, until morning. The beech tree will shelter him; she will spread her strong arms over him, shutting out the chill eye of the moon. And when the sun rises and the long night is over, he knows where he will go.

~Cara~

The forest knew everything. News passed on a breath of wind, in the call of an owl, in the small pattern of a squirrel's footsteps. The trout in the stream learned it. The lark soaring high above saw it. The knowledge was in the hearts of the trees and in the mysterious rustling of their leaves. It was a deep-down wisdom, as solemn as a druid's prayer.

She never talked about it. Not with Father, not with Aunt Della, not even with Gormán. She'd learned long ago that if she spoke of that great knowledge people thought she was being foolish or fanciful. That didn't matter. What mattered was saying it to the trees, over and over, so they knew she was their friend and guardian and could hear their slow voices. She spoke to each of them in turn, in a whisper, with her body against the trunk and her cheek pressed to the bark, as if she and the tree shared the same beating heart. Rough oak, smooth willow, furrowed ash, every tree in the wood. I will protect you. I will guard you. I give you my word.

The promise wasn't foolish or fanciful. It made perfect sense. One day the holding at Wolf Glen would be hers to watch over. Mother was dead. Father would never marry again. There was nobody else to inherit the house, the farm, the forest. All of it, and all the folk who lived and worked there would be hers to care for, hers to look after.

Father didn't talk about the future, even now Cara was in her sixteenth year. But she knew he expected her to marry someday and produce an heir. She let herself dream, sometimes, about what might have been if she had not been a girl and the only child. She could have become a master wood carver. She could have spent all day making creatures and chests and chairs with fine decoration, toys for children, platters to hold fruit, spindles and cradles and walking staves with owls on them. Or she could have been a forester like Gormán. Gormán had been her friend since almost before she could walk. He had taught her

the properties of different woods. He had shown her how to use a sharp knife without hurting herself or ruining good materials. Sometimes she would open up her special storage chest and get out the collection of little animals she'd made over the years. She loved them all, from the rabbit she had crafted from pine at six years old to the owl she'd coaxed not long ago from a well-weathered block of oak. The owl had its wings lifted ready for flight, and when Cara looked at it she imagined spreading wings of her own and flying off over the treetops, wild and free. When she had held each of her little creatures in turn, stroked each, spoken softly to each, she would shut them away in the chest again. Her father loved Wolf Glen too, but his love was tinged with a darkness she did not understand.

Soon, she knew, Father would start looking for a prospective husband for her. Father and Aunt Della had set their expectations high, hoping for a chieftain's son. But wouldn't that mean she would have to leave Wolf Glen? That could not happen. She would be like a sapling pulled up roughly, roots and all, then shoved into barren ground where it could not thrive. She would turn into a dull shadow of a woman whom nobody could possibly want as a wife. And who would look after the forest if she was not here?

Some girls were already wed at fifteen. Some were mothers. But that was not possible for her. It was unthinkable. If she married, how would she have time for any of the things that mattered? There would be no time to hear the many voices of the forest, no time to watch the patterns of leaves and light, no time to breathe the crisp air, no time to feel the weight of a fine piece of wood in her hands, seeing in her mind the forms that lay within. What if the husband her father chose for her did not understand these things? What if she tried to talk to him and her words suddenly vanished, the way they did sometimes when she was talking to Father or Aunt Della? The suitor would think her a half-wit, and Father would be furious, and that would make it even more impossible to get words out.

Perhaps she could refuse to wed unless the man loved the same things she loved.

Somewhere, surely, there must be at least one other person like her. If she could summon the right words, maybe she could persuade Father to wait awhile. Some women married and had babies when they were quite old, twenty or even five-and-twenty. Her maid Alba had told her so. There was plenty of time. Years.

Or so she thought, up till the day the wild man came to Wolf Glen, and everything changed.

She'd been out by the barn, showing Gormán a drawing she'd made for a carving of a squirrel. He'd promised to look out for the right piece of wood but warned her it might take some time to find it. 'Off you go, then,' he'd said in his gruff way. 'I've my big axe to sharpen, and I don't want you anywhere near while I'm doing it, young lady.'

Alba had come to the yard too, but now she was nowhere in sight. One of the farm cats had produced a litter of kittens not long ago, and Cara guessed her maid was in the barn petting them; Alba loved cats. It was a good opportunity to go walking on her own – not far enough to get either Gormán or Alba in trouble, just down to the heartwood house. She could be back before anyone noticed she was gone. There was a rule about wandering off without a companion, and Aunt Della would be unhappy if she found out Cara had broken it. The rule was nonsense. Cara could find her way home from anywhere in the forest, even places where she had never been before. The trees were her friends. What harm could she possibly come to? Perhaps Aunt Della thought her stupid enough to get in the way of an axe like that giant implement Gormán was working on now. That was just as silly. Gormán had taught her to be careful in the workshop. She knew how tools should be used, how they were kept sharp, how they were protected from rust. She knew how to avoid cutting herself or someone else when she used her wood-carving knives. But she couldn't explain that to Aunt Della. In her aunt's opinion, a young lady should spend her time sewing, spinning, weaving, and learning how to

run a household, not messing about with sharp objects and making things that were of no possible use to anyone. Most times, while Cara was still struggling to find the right words, Aunt Della would end the conversation by saying, ‘Oh, Cara, you’re such a child.’ But that wasn’t true. She had her moon-bleeding now, and her body was changing, and that meant, surely, that she was not a child but a woman.

The heartwood house was not much of a house, only an old ruin in a clearing. Each winter it crumbled away a bit more. Although it was not very far from the barn, the pattern of the trees and the rise and fall of the land meant it could barely be seen until a person was almost on top of it. Father had been building it at the time of her mother’s death. Once Suanach was gone, work on the house had ceased. It had been left as it was, hardly even a shelter for forest creatures, since it had no roof. In another year or two the last of it would fall and the forest would reclaim the clearing. Cara liked the quiet way the wild things were moving to blanket the broken structure.

When she was little, but old enough to be curious, she’d been full of questions about the heartwood house. In those days she’d had no trouble saying what she wanted to, straight out. She’d been brimming with words. Why was it called that? What was it for? Why couldn’t they finish building it? Back then, more of the structure had been standing, and it had been easier to imagine what it might have been like had the work been finished. She had noticed, even then, that there were different kinds of wood in it. She’d wandered through the ruin touching them, looking at the colours and the patterns of them, guessing what they were, until Father had caught her at it and ordered her away from the place, saying it was not safe. He did not answer any of her questions. Indeed, he was so stern and sad that she stopped asking him.

Aunt Della gave all the questions the same response: she had not been living at Wolf Glen while Cara’s mother was alive, and when Suanach had died the heartwood house had

been abandoned. So Aunt Della knew nothing at all about it except, she said, that it was a subject best not discussed, and especially not in Tóla's hearing. Cara would be better off putting her excess curiosity into learning her letters and numbers or improving her plain sewing.

Gormán knew the answers, some of them anyway, but even he was reluctant to talk. When she was a little older Cara realised her persistence could have got him into trouble. He could have lost his position in the household and been sent away from Wolf Glen, which had been his home for years. Gormán was a kindly man, and patient with her. Why was it called a heartwood house? That was a name from an old tale. No, he did not know the tale, but a heartwood house was said to be lucky. When Cara had commented with five-year-old bluntness that it had not been very lucky for her mother, since she had died, Gormán had crouched down, taken her hands in his and looked her straight in the eye.

'Cara,' he'd said, his voice so soft and sorrowful it made her feel shivery, 'don't ever say that to your father. Promise me.'

'But why?'

'Because he thinks, if he'd got it finished, she might have . . . because it would make him very, very sad. Promise.'

'I promise.' She'd hardly understood, back then. 'Why didn't he get it finished?'

'Never mind that.'

'You could have built it,' she'd said.

That had made Gormán smile. 'Finding the wood, getting all the pieces ready, maybe. Putting a house together, no. I'm no builder. And this would be quite a tricky sort of house. A very special house.' Then, in a different tone, 'Want to see a thrush's nest? I spotted one this morning, up in the big oak.'

Her mother and the heartwood house and the things she could not ask her father had all

been instantly forgotten. A thrush's nest! With eggs in it, or even little baby birds! She was, after all, only five years old.

But the promise she'd made was a deep-down thing, and Cara did remember it. As time passed and she grew up, the heartwood house crumbled away year by year, and Father did not mend it, and never once did she ask him why.

There was a special tree down by the heartwood house. Cara called it the guardian oak. When she was little, it had seemed to her so tall that its topmost branches surely touched the clouds. It had seemed a being of wonder and secrets, full of hiding places, tenanted by all manner of creatures, the seen and the unseen. She'd been a confident climber almost from the time she could walk, and she had spent more time than her father and aunt ever imagined up in that tree, safe in the cradle of its great arms, pretending to be a squirrel or a bird or a beetle, peering out through the foliage to see folk about their work, hoping nobody would come looking for her before she was ready to be found. Birds would gather on the branches around her, preening their feathers, making their subtle sounds, taking so little notice of her that she might as well have been part of the tree. Sometimes they would come and perch on her shoulders or in her hair. She used to tell the guardian oak stories, the kind of stories little children made up, and she thought the tree replied in a voice so slow and deep that human ears could not really understand it, though she knew what it was saying: Ah, yes. Tell me more, small one. Even now she told the tree her secrets. It was so much easier to talk to trees than people. People didn't stay quiet and listen, really listen. People interrupted. They fidgeted. You could see from their faces that their thoughts were at least half on something quite different. Aunt Della would be thinking, How will this strange child ever find a husband? Father would be lost in some dream of the past, his eyes full of a sorrow his only daughter could not lift. Gormán was a good listener, but even he would have his mind on whatever job he had to start on as soon as Cara had finished her tale.

Fifteen was not too old for climbing trees. If she was quick she could get up to her favourite perch, sit there awhile, and still be back at the barn before Alba grew tired of the kittens. She tucked her hem into her girdle, eyed the distance, then jumped to hang by her hands. Once she had a good grip, she swung her legs up and braced her feet against the trunk. From there it was a simple matter of stretching one arm a bit further to grab a particular side limb, then hauling herself up to a firm purchase. She climbed higher, up to her lookout, where she could sit comfortably at the junction of trunk and branch and see without being seen. The barn, the stables and the yard, a certain way off, and Gormán working on his big axe. Still no sign of Alba. Further away, twin rows of lovely beeches leading to Wolf Glen's main dwelling. And nearer at hand . . . She froze. There was a strange man down there, almost directly below her, standing so perfectly still he might have been made of stone. He was wild-looking, filthy, with matted hair halfway down his back, a bristling beard and crazy eyes, and he was staring at the scattered remnants of the heartwood house.

Now perhaps you understand why it is not advisable for a young lady to go wandering about on her own, said Aunt Della in her mind. Though probably this was just some fellow down on his luck, a hapless wanderer who would pass by and never be seen again. As daughter of the house she should climb down, introduce herself, and point the way toward the kitchen, where they'd give him a good meal. And a wash; he was the dirtiest person Cara had seen in her whole life. But she did not climb down, not even when she saw Alba come out of the barn, look around for her, then head directly toward her hiding place. Alba didn't call Cara's name; she could guess where she was, and she understood that drawing attention might get Cara in trouble. Gormán looked up from his work as Alba passed, then went back to it.

The wild man did not move. The heartwood house seemed to hold him spellbound. Should she shout to Alba, warn her? While Alba and Gormán would be able to see the top of

the guardian oak, the heartwood house would be invisible from over there; the trick of the land made sure of that. They could not see the man. But if she made a noise the man would know she was here, and although Alba could run back to Gormán, Cara could not. Not without climbing down and going right past the stranger.

She waited, not moving, as Alba came closer. When the maid-servant was almost at the heartwood house the wild man started, turning his head. He had seen Alba, but she, walking steadily forward, had not seen him.

‘Alba!’ Cara called. ‘Go back! Fetch Gormán!’

Alba halted, stared, then turned and fled. And now the wild man’s attention was all on Cara. If she had thought herself well concealed she’d been wrong. He was staring at her as if he wanted to eat her up. In the filthy, neglected ruin of his face his eyes were burning coals, hungry and desperate. Ice spread through her. Her heart hammered so hard she thought she might lose her balance and come crashing down at his feet. Gormán’s coming, she told herself, gripping the branch so tightly her fingers hurt. Gormán’s coming and he’s big and strong and it will be all right. Just stay up here and don’t move. What if the wild man could climb? Don’t think about it, Cara. Breathe. Wait.

An endless time, then, while he stared, stock-still, and Cara stared back, thinking that the moment she took her eyes off him he would be up the tree like a squirrel and it would be all over for her. In that time she heard birds moving about in the foliage, and a dog barking somewhere on the farm, and the wind stirring the leaves, and she hoped she could hear the voice of the oak, saying, You will be safe. You are one of ours. How could that man keep so still? Nobody could be so still. Could he be one of the fey, a being with magical powers? Cara had never been sure if they were real or just a thing in stories. She’d wanted them to be real, but that wasn’t the same. If this man was one, he was unlike any description of fey folk in any tale she’d heard. Weren’t they supposed to be elegant and beautiful? This man looked

– and smelled – as if he'd been rolling in the midden.

She was shivering. Her fingers didn't want to hold on any longer. Spots danced before her eyes; she went from freezing cold to burning hot. Don't faint, Cara. If she fell from this height the wild man would be the least of her problems.

And then there was another voice: Gormán's. 'Cara? Where are you?' He strode into view with Conn behind him. Gormán had the big axe over his shoulder; Conn carried an iron bar.

'Up here,' she called, feeling more foolish than frightened now.

The wild man moved, backing away from the oak as if to give her room. Perhaps he really was only a wanderer in need of a good feed and a corner of the barn to sleep in.

'Climb down, Cara.' Gormán spoke calmly, but there was a note in his voice that scared her. He had his eye on the stranger, every moment. Even when she jumped down the last bit to land more or less beside him, he did not look at her. 'Conn will walk back to the house with you. Do as I ask, please. Conn, make sure Alba has delivered the message. Now go.'

Cara risked a quick glance at the wild man, and he made a sound. Perhaps he was trying to talk, but what came out was a grunting, moaning noise, so sad and terrible that tears sprang to her eyes.

'Come, Cara,' Conn said. 'Quickly.'

She turned and followed him. He was walking fast; she had to scurry to keep up. But she still heard what Gormán said, behind her.

'In the name of all the gods. You're alive.'

Later that same day, Father sent for her. It would be a lecture on behaving like a lady. If he started that conversation about suitors, perhaps telling her young men of good breeding

would not be interested in a person with twigs in her hair and her skirts hitched up to an unseemly height, she'd only have herself to blame. Cara wondered if he would say anything about the wild man. How was it that Gormán knew him? And where was he now?

She changed into a gown she knew her father liked, in soft wool dyed violet-blue. There was no sign of Alba, so she plaited her own hair and pinned it up as neatly as she could. It was somewhat wild at the best of times, with a tendency to curl when there was the slightest trace of damp. Aunt Della had been known to refer to it as a bird's nest. Cara quite liked the notion of walking around with a clutch of peeping owlets snuggled up there. Her hair was the right colour for a nest, being of many shades of brown – lichen, oak bark, pebble, vole, autumn beech. Plaited, the colours blended into an innocuous muddy hue.

‘Father?’ She tapped on the open door of the council chamber.

‘Come in, Cara.’ He was sitting at his work table with documents spread out before him. Cara had thought Aunt Della might be with him, but he was alone. ‘Close the door, if you will.’

There was a flask of mead on the table, with a pair of goblets. At his gesture, she poured a small measure for herself, a more generous one for him.

‘Well now, Daughter.’ Father gazed at her as if thinking hard. She could not tell if he was sad – he was often sad – or merely thoughtful.

Cara’s stomach felt suddenly odd, as if there were a knot of eels squirming around in there. Should she try to say sorry for what had happened earlier? It wasn’t as if she had done anything wrong. All she’d done was take a slight risk. Nobody had been hurt. Yes, she had broken a rule, but . . .

‘I know how much you love this place,’ Father said. ‘As much as I do, I believe. When your mother died . . .’

It had been a long time ago. Never having known her mother, Cara did not miss her.

But Father still grieved her loss. There was something sorrowful about him even when he was at his most commanding.

'Never mind that,' he went on, collecting himself. 'If I have been critical, sometimes, of your tendency to . . .' He faltered again.

Something was wrong. Something more than her error of judgement. She made those often enough, and usually got no more than a mild reprimand from Aunt Della.

'Your aunt and I have been discussing your future,' Father said. 'Your welfare. You are nearly sixteen. I believe I have been somewhat selfish. Keeping you up here with me, out of touch with other folk . . . not finding opportunities for you . . . The situation must change. It's for your own good.'

Words bubbled up, urgent words. But they lost themselves before her lips and tongue could speak them. All that came out was a desperate little sound, a chirp of panic.

'Within a year or two we'll need to consider a marriage for you. To be honest, that prospect seems hardly possible at this stage. Your aunt and I agree that you are entirely unready for it. To mingle with society, to create and manage a household of her own, a young woman requires a certain minimum of social awareness.'

In her mind was an anguished plea: Don't send me away! Oh, please! She tried to get the words out, tried so hard she choked and had to gulp down a mouthful of mead.

'You make no comment,' Father said gravely. 'But I know you can speak when you choose to, Cara. I've heard you talking away to that maid of yours. I've heard you chatting with Gormán. This stubbornness is childish. I don't understand it. Can you not see how distressed your aunt is by your refusal to talk to her? You are not a wild creature but a young lady of good family. Della has given up years of her life to care for you.'

She hung her head. He considered her a disappointment. A burden. As if it were her fault her mother had died when Cara was less than a year old. As if her father's grief was her

doing. He didn't love her. Couldn't, or he would understand that if she could talk to him, she would say that she loved him more than anything, that he was her family, that she would give everything she had if only she could bring back his smile.

She looked at him again. He gazed back, and she thought she saw in his eyes a reflection of the inadequate daughter that motherless infant had grown up to be. She made her lips form the sound; tried as hard as she could to get it out. 'Wh— what . . . ?'

'I'm sending you away for a while,' he said.

Cara had wondered, hearing old tales, what it felt like when your heart turned cold. Now she knew. It was like being a tiny bird, a robin or wren, and looking up to see a cat two paces away, ready to pounce. 'Wh— wh—' Her voice was a thread. 'Where?'

'Not far,' he said, and her heart unclenched just a little, letting her breathe. Perhaps he only meant a few days' visit somewhere . . . From full moon to half, she could perhaps bear that . . . 'I had thought to send you to court for a period,' Father went on, 'but I believe that would be too much to ask. You will go instead to Prince Oran's household at Winterfalls. As he is now a married man with a child it will be perfectly proper, and if you apply yourself you should acquire all the skills your aunt believes you need. You will meet a wider circle there, including some young men of good family.'

Winterfalls. Cara had visited the place a few times, as it was on the way to the Dalriadan court. Prince Oran had seemed a reserved sort of man, scholarly and quiet. A little stuffy for a man his age. When Cara had last been there, he had not yet been married. His wife would be a younger version of Aunt Della, all too ready to tell people when they were not meeting her expectations. It would be unbearable. It would be a lonely exile. She wanted to ask how long a while was. She wanted to tell him she could practise her court manners perfectly well at home, since Aunt Della knew all about that sort of thing. She wanted to remind him that she'd done nothing to disgrace him, the time he and she had gone to

Cahercorcan for a few days. Perhaps folk had thought her silence impolite; perhaps they had found it odd that she'd spent so much time up on the high walkways looking out to sea, or sitting in the garden on her own. But she had been perfectly well behaved. The worst she had done was occasionally forget to conceal a yawn of boredom. She could say none of this. It was too many words; it was too hard. If she tried she would cry, and Father hated it when she cried.

A new thought came to her. That wild man, out by the guardian oak – did this sudden decision have something to do with him? ‘The . . .’ she whispered. ‘The . . . man . . . b-before . . .’

‘This is nothing to do with any man.’ His response was swift; so swift that she thought it might not be true. But he was her father. A father did not lie to his only daughter. ‘Your aunt and I have been discussing this matter for some time,’ he added. ‘It’s for your safety. For your future. For the future of Wolf Glen. If you’re to marry, you must at the very least learn to stammer out more than a word or two at a time. The sooner you learn to sustain a conversation and to conduct yourself in an appropriate manner, the sooner you can come back to Wolf Glen. That seems to me entirely reasonable.’

She pushed down the roiling mass of feelings that threatened to undo her. If she wept or screamed or ran from the room, he would say she had just proved how badly she needed training in ladylike behaviour. ‘H-how . . . how long? And when?’

‘Until you have learned what you must learn. I will miss you; I have no desire to lose you for any longer than necessary. But necessary it is. As for when, I will ride to Winterfalls with you tomorrow and see you settled.’

Tomorrow. This was a bad dream. Why would he do this to her? Didn’t he know it was like wrenching out her heart?

‘Your aunt will help you pack,’ Father said. ‘Best attend to that now.’

‘Alba?’ she managed. ‘C-comes too?’

‘You won’t need Alba. There will be many maidservants at Winterfalls. Mature, responsible maidservants.’

‘B-b—’

‘Go, Cara. Do your packing. Say your farewells. Within a few days you’ll be thanking me for this.’ He regarded her more closely. ‘Don’t look so woeful, Daughter. The world will not turn to ruin just because you are away from Wolf Glen for a season or two.’ He picked up his cup and took a drink.

A season or two? She sprang to her feet, knocking her own cup over. Mead ran across the work table, and as she looked about for a cloth, Father snatched the documents clear of the flood. She fished out a clean handkerchief from her pouch and attempted to stem the flow. ‘I c-c-can’t!’ Tears were building behind her eyes. ‘Father, p-please!’

‘Leave that, Cara, let the servants deal with it.’ Father’s tone was suddenly weighed down, burdened with that old sorrow. ‘My decision is made, and you must learn to live with it.’