

PROLOGUE

Cullen ran through the redwood forest, grabbing frantically at his chest. His breath came in shallow bursts of pain, while his feet sank in the soft loam with every step. He couldn't shake the feeling of the vines creeping over his skin, spreading and slithering like sadistic snakes. He grappled with the invisible vines around his throat, choking him.

The moon shone brightly through the thick foliage overhead, casting eerie shadows below. If Cullen hadn't known these woods so well, he surely would have tripped; but even in his frenzied state, he leapt over fallen trees and massive jutting roots with cervine grace.

He cleared the edge of the forest, still clawing at his neck, leaving behind a crisscross of long red welts. Now in full view, the moon hung big and round, its shadows much harsher without the distortion of the trees. This certainly was a Halloween night he would never forget. The freshly-mowed lawn cushioned his steps. As he cut across it approaching his house, his breath slowed and he felt calmer. Almost home. Almost safe.

Cullen stepped into his darkened room and slid into bed with a sigh of relief.

Suddenly, he had no idea how he got there.

1

c. 592 A.D., CALEDONIA - The wind whipped over the rolling Highlands, blowing the heather in a frenzied dance. The flowers filled the air with fragrant sweetness. A herd of deer soared across the hills in the fading daylight, turning together as one to follow the wind. The autumn moon emerged red over the horizon, impossibly big and perfectly round. The harvest moon. Its light spilled over the mountains as it ascended, contrasting the evening sky around it. The celestial light on this cold, black night eventually found the sacred stone circle below. A bonfire blazed within its center, casting a warmer, livelier light than the distant moon. Blue painted figures danced around the fire, wearing little more than the paint on their skin. They exhaled a visible mist, despite the warmth of the bonfire, and goose bumps showed on their bodies. They held autumn wreaths and harvest fruits as they twirled and wove around and between each other. A handful of celebrants skillfully played shallow, flat

drums, or kept the rhythm with rib bones played like castanets between the first three fingers. The beat echoed with the pulse of the life around them. They moved and leapt into the air with impressive grace, staying in perfect rhythm with the cadence. One woman, with wild blonde hair, played a flute while she danced. With pixie-like movements, she skipped around the fire, weaving amongst the dancers. Her fingers flew over the stops as nimbly as her feet frolicked over the freezing ground.

A massive flat stone resting on two boulders dominated one end of the circle, serving as an altar. Several carved gourds sat upon it. Their candle-lit faces flickered to the sounds of the surrounding drumbeats. An old man and woman, with long white hair, happily tapped their toes to the merriment. Every breath showed the quickly dropping temperature; still they danced until the drumming and dancing ended simultaneously on a heavy downbeat.

Synchronized, as if the drums still played, the tribe turned their attention to a man and woman who had appeared in the firelight at the far end of the stone circle, opposite the altar. They stood there regally, dressed in deep green ceremonial robes decorated with the intricate knot-work of their tribe. The uncertain, quivering light of the fire hid their age well, but their pale faces revealed four decades of joy and love imprinted in their crow's feet and smile lines. The woman's red flowing hair twisted in the wind. She wore a wreath of heather and rosemary on her head. Her green eyes gazed upon her companion adoringly. A red beard lightly covered his chiseled jaw, and a wreath of rosemary decorated his own red locks. His eyes, full of devotion and kindness, looked into hers. Something deeper also burned in his blue eyes: unquenched desire and a love like fire. He took her hand and pulled her close; his crown of herbs touching hers. The wind entwined the strands of their hair together.

"Anocht, ar deireadh," he whispered in the Gaelic native to them all and placed a soft kiss on her forehead.

Tonight, finally.

Rowan and Fiana had finally reached their wedding day. They had each heard the call of the goddess for service, and they had each answered. From the young age of ten, they began the long journey toward becoming a druidic priest and priestess. They had been childhood friends before that and fell in love by the age of twelve. Tradition demanded they remain chaste, which proved difficult

during the years of such close proximity. While their outside friends grew up, got married and had children, they remained pure, to honor their tribe and their customs. They had vowed to wait until after they had been anointed as the tribe's new priest and priestess, gathering power and magic to help and protect their people. For thirty long years, they had waited, but their wedding day had finally arrived. Tonight, they would be anointed and wed at long last.

The crowd chanted, "*Awen, awen, awen.*" The couple parted hesitantly, as if it pained them to be out of the other's reach. Their fingertips lingered a moment longer than necessary before parting completely. They each walked around the bonfire on opposite sides, between it and their surrounding tribe. The painted people gathered hand-woven baskets full of multicolored leaves and showered the pair as they passed. Fiana felt more like a goddess than a priestess. She reveled in the warmth of her tribe's love and looked past the dancing flames to her betrothed. Many maidens would be frightened on their wedding night, but not her. She had waited too long. Fear was the furthest emotion from her mind. Nothing could go wrong tonight, nothing.

The moon, now high in the sky, created gentler shadows below. The fire illuminated the falling leaves, which shone like gold in the reflected firelight as they twirled down onto the proceeding couple. Rowan caught sight of Fiana gazing at him through the fire, and his heart quickened once again. The autumn leaves fluttered around him and the chanting of his tribe filled his ears; but nothing could draw his attention away from Fiana. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever known, and tonight he would have her in his arms at last. Tonight would be the beginning of their life together as priest and priestess, as protectors of their tribe, as husband and wife, as lovers. As soon as they cleared the far side of the fire, he reached for her hand. She took it eagerly and meeting his unwavering gaze, they approached the altar.

Clad in white robes, the old couple at the altar waited patiently for the bride and groom. The old man smoothed down his long white beard, causing the tip that extended past his belly to dance in the wind. The old woman's braid extended straight down her back, nearly reaching her knees.

Rowan and Fiana had been chosen to replace the old ones, the reigning priest and priestess of this tribe. It was a great honor to be chosen, not only for themselves, but for their families as well. No one had expected the fire of the goddess to burn so brightly inside them. Many of the tribe had commented on

the extent of their power. Even the elders spoke of power that exceeded all the ancient tales. Together, they would be more puissant than anything the tribe had ever known. After their union, they alone would be powerful enough to chase the invaders out of Caledonia forever. They knew little about this new religion of the invaders, but many of the men who followed the new god killed any who practiced the old ways and refused to convert. The invaders' beliefs held that they were superior to all other religions and were justified in ridding the world of those they called "heathens."

The union of these two lovers on this magical night would not only alter their fate, but it would change the destiny of the tribe and all of Caledonia. To further increase their power, they had chosen the night of Samhain to consummate their love. The veil to the Otherworld was the thinnest on this night. The magic that would flow into them would create a bond that could never be broken, not even by death. They had so longed for this moment, and it would all happen tonight.

The tribe moved closer to the altar to get a better look. Some shivered in the cold and huddled by the fire, but all were silent. Only the crackle of the fire and the faint whisper of the wind could be heard on this magical night. The heat rose between the couple's eyes, and the old priest finally broke the silence.

He coughed once and then spoke loudly in the throaty beauty of Gaelic, welcoming their dear friends. "*Failte - fearadh na failte cairde.*"

The crowd's attention focused on him. Even Rowan and Fiana broke their gaze and released the other's hand to face him, their retiring priest, reverently.

"Today," the priest began, "we celebrate the union of spirit and flesh between Rowan and Fiana. Through decades of study, they have perfected the roles of bard and green maiden. They are now ready, on this sweet Samhain night, to be elevated to the rank of Priest and Priestess. They are *our* new way. A new generation of magic and power begins with this union. Through our spiritual dance, we welcome the dawn of winter and the slumber of autumn, on the night where those who have passed into the Otherworld might look upon us, sharing the magic of their world with us who remain in this one. May the goddess fill their bodies with her essence this night and, in their union, bring together all of Caledonia in safety and love."

He turned momentarily away from them and lifted a thick loaf of bread from

the stone altar. Tearing it in half, he said, "As a symbol of the god's blessing, I offer this bread to you."

Rowan took the bread and fed it to Fiana saying, "May you never hunger." He purposely let his finger glide across the bottom of Fiana's lip. She gasped slightly and smiled, feeling her face flush at his touch. The sensation quickly spread throughout her body. She saw the same desire burning in his eyes as he took a bite of the bread.

The priest cleared his throat again, snapping their attention back to him. He turned to his wife who now held a silver goblet. She spoke with a voice deeper than one would expect to emerge from such a delicate, frail woman.

"As a symbol of the goddess's blessing, I offer this wine."

Fiana cupped the chalice in her hands and held it up to Rowan's lips, tilting the cup towards him, "May you never thirst."

The wine felt warm on his lips against the chill of the night, but once inside his body, it cooled the heat impatient to burst forth. Fiana, too, tasted the rich wine; then they both returned the offering to the old couple. The old priest motioned for them to join hands. They crossed their arms and took the other's hand into their own, forming the symbol for infinity. Fiana felt the penetration of Rowan's eyes into her very soul, and she had to catch her breath. The old priestess took one end of a braided tartan cloth; the old priest took the other end. Together, they draped the plaited tartan around the hands of the bride and groom.

"You have both waited a long time," the old man said. "You have each passed the tests. Now, it's time for celebration—and *union*."

The old woman added, "You are now bound together in love, forever."

Rowan and Fiana clasped their hands tighter, gazing at each other in anticipation. The tribe collectively held their breath, waiting.

"Don't just stand there," the old man chided with a smile, "Kiss her!"

Rowan laughed heartily; and the newly wedded couple pulled free of the braid and fell into each other's arms, kissing passionately, as if they had been waiting their entire lives for this moment. They had. Not once in all these years had they stolen even a single kiss. Now Fiana's lips felt even softer than petals of

heather against his own. Desire welled up inside him, and he felt like he would burst. Being this close to her, he found his own flesh an obstacle. He wanted nothing more than to fold himself inside her skin and become one person. Nothing else would be close enough.

With their tribe roaring in approval behind them, the drumming and dancing struck up as their lips parted from their first kiss, but their arms remained tightly wrapped around each other. The smiles on their faces shone as tears of joy sparkled in their eyes. They held each other tightly and swayed to the music.

A horrible *thunk* suddenly interrupted the celebration, not at all in rhythm with the drumbeat. The music staggering into silence drew Rowan's attention away from his new wife. He turned to the priest and saw the old man's smile fade, as a bright red stain spread across his white robe like a blooming rose. He stumbled backwards against the stone altar, knocking over the goblet. Propping himself up against the rough stone, he grasped the arrow sticking awkwardly out of his chest, not understanding what had just happened. The old woman rushed to her dying husband, desperately whispering incantations over his wound.

After a collective gasp from his tribe, all was strangely silent for a moment. Rowan could not understand from where the arrow came. Then in the next moment, sounds of chaos filled his ears. A painted woman behind them screamed. Hoofbeats loud and then gone, as if coming to an abrupt stop from a full gallop. Trampling feet and clanking metal. More hoofbeats.

Clasping Fiana tightly to his chest, Rowan whipped around to see scores of angry men pouring into their sacred ceremony. His mind caught up with reality.

Fiana felt her heart sink in her chest, hollow with the loss of hope. In a timeless moment, she looked up at Rowan; the sadness in his eyes matched her emptiness. A tear fell from the corner of her eye. The wind touched the wetness and she felt cold. Rowan wiped it away with his thumb. They stepped away from each other and readied for battle.

Everything happened in an instant. The crowd fled from their attackers in all directions, but few got away before the slaughter began. A man on horseback seized the flautist, who screamed helplessly as he flung her across the horse's neck and rode away. Other men with long swords rushed the frightened

community. The tribe had been nearly naked for the ceremony; most of the tribe was completely unarmed. It had been careless of them, but they had never expected this. Not tonight. One man stepped in front of a near-naked woman, trying to protect her, but an attacker cornered them and viciously drove a sword through them both.

Rowan's once gentle face filled with anger as he watched his tribe being torn apart. The heat of rage replaced every other emotion, as he reached down the bell sleeve of his robe and pulled out a knotty piece of wood, just as one of the invaders descended upon him. Rowan threw him off with the strength of many men. The man's clutching hand ripped the front of Rowan's robe, revealing a Celtic Tree tattooed on his chest. He pointed the wand at the invaders and screamed, "*Stadaim!*"

Fiana appeared right beside him, wand drawn, and repeated, "*Stadaim!*"

Instinct had taken over and the tears had dried. Her anger made her strong and focused. The magic of the goddess coursed through her, more powerful than ever before.

A few men stopped, frozen by the magic; but most of the assailants continued the slaughter without even a glance at their statuesque opponents.

"There are too many!" Fiana cried, in the midst of throwing spells at their attackers. Her confidence wavered.

Rowan's very being filled with dread. His first day as High Priest and he would get them all killed. He should have been better prepared. He would fail them all unless he could find some way to help them, to save them—to save her. He looked around for some sign of an exit, but they were surrounded. Then he noticed a thin blue haze appearing near the altar. The smoke began to part in the middle and it spread, revealing a doorway. Their salvation.

"The Otherworld!" he screamed to Fiana, pointing to the mysterious doorway. "Get as many as you can through the veil. We will be safe there until it reopens."

"And you?"

"I will be close behind."

"I will not leave you. Not now."

“I will be right behind. Now go! Before it is too late!”

“You cannot hold them alone.”

She was right, and he knew it. He could not hold them alone, but together they could, for at least long enough to get most of the tribe to safety. Their greatest power took form when they touched. Rowan grabbed Fiana’s hand and a surge of energy shuddered through them from the heart of the Earth. With a unified deepened voice, they pointed their wands and shouted, “*Stadaim!*”

Their adversaries all froze where they stood, with only their eyes rolling wildly like trapped beasts as they tried to understand why they couldn’t move.

Rowan turned to Fiana; the magic they conjured shone from her like divine light, making her even more beautiful than ever. He forced himself to look away from the goddess before him. He shouted to his tribe, “All of you, through the veil!” The spell wouldn’t last long—it was too intense to sustain. It would weaken them quickly.

The tribe looked at the doorway uncertainly, then back to the remains of their fallen friends.

“It is the only way to survive. Quickly—now!” He spoke the last words in thunderous reverberation.

The frightened people rushed past the newlyweds, past the altar, and into the blue smoke. As they stepped through, they disappeared from mortal sight.

“Now you, my love,” Rowan said already feeling weaker. “Go. When we break our connection, I can only hold them for a moment. I will be right behind you.”

Fiana looked at him and pleaded with her eyes. Her heart filled with the love and longing that had consumed her adulthood, pushing the emptiness away. How could she leave him, even for a moment? Stay and die together, or go and risk never seeing him again. She searched for some other way, but found none.

“Fiana, we do not have the time,” Rowan insisted. “We will be together in the Otherworld.” Only steps away, they could both make it through; but she must go through first.

Fiana’s knees quavered in her exhaustion, and she fought to remain standing. She clenched his hand tighter and said, “But no one has ever crossed over and come back alive.”

“Then we will be the first. Once we complete our union, love, our power will be greater than anyone has ever known. Now go!” The gentle urgency in his voice brimmed with regret and love as he spoke to her. He squeezed her hand and then let it go with a faint push toward the veil.

She took a tremulous step back and then hesitated, perhaps a moment too long. A moment that would haunt her forever.

Rowan struggled to hold the slowly reanimating attackers. His fallen brethren surrounded him. The doorway began to close; the blue smoke became denser. Fiana lingered on the threshold.

She cried to her husband, “Rowan! The veil—it’s closing!”

“Go through!”

“Not without you!”

“Go through now! I’m coming.”

He stumbled toward Fiana, catching his balance on the stone altar, as the angry men came at him. Fiana passed through, and Rowan followed a step behind; but instead of passing into the Otherworld with the others, he walked right through the smoke. Right through Fiana.

Fiana screamed in anguish and fell to her knees, reaching out towards him, her husband, trapped on the other side of the veil with the invaders.

Rowan could not hear her, but he could still faintly see her fallen figure through the fading smoke. He had no time to try and stop the angry men. Only a moment more and they would be upon him.

“Come back for me,” Rowan said to Fiana’s pale figure. Pointing his wand to the middle of the tattoo on his chest, he said, “*Folaigh*.” In a flash of light, he disappeared into his wand, and it fell next to the altar.

The men stopped abruptly when Rowan disappeared, looking around confused. They backed away from the wand lying motionless on the ground, crossing themselves, and mumbling prayers of protection. A brazen fat monk, bolder than the rest, pushed through their ranks and strode up to the edge of the remaining smoke, smiling.

Fiana watched in dismay through the disappearing veil as the monk stood over the fallen wand. He curiously picked the wand up and with a look of triumph slid it with some difficulty into the rope belt around his overstuffed belly.

Fiana reached out in pain as the veil closed, knowing it would be a year before she could return. She watched helplessly as the monk walked away.

2

Cullen trudged over the well-manicured lawn towards the misty redwoods. On this particularly cold October morning in Northern California, the frost clung to the grass like sugar clings to candied ginger. Cullen's best friend Maddy had once brought some candied ginger from home and had given him a piece. Her mother, one of those organic health nuts, didn't believe in giving children real candy. Maddy had to get hers from their other best friend April, who always had plenty to go around.

As he stepped into his lush sanctuary, Cullen's gait slowed to a contemplative amble. The forest demanded a different attitude from him: It was a magical, eldritch place, especially when it was wreathed in its mist. The magic of this place did not lie solely with the trees. The sunlight held its own magic as it filtered down through the canopy, illuminating the mist, creating an air of reverence like an old cathedral. That was what it really was: A cathedral, built not to God but by God. Massive columns of living wood stretched up to the heavens. Daylight twinkled through arches of evergreen, illuminating various nooks of its choosing with a green-tainted radiance. Some trees had grown so massive they had split open their own trunks, creating hidden naves large enough for Cullen to lie within. Running water trickled in myriad springs and rivulets that perfumed the air with a tinkling chorus of liquid movement, while new growth and freshness caressed the damp air with sweet aromas. If only he could stay in this glorious place forever.

This was his favorite part of the day, the time when he left home and went to school. Once completely concealed from his house, he shrugged off his old Batman backpack and removed the tattered copy of *The Hobbit* that had once belonged to his father, his only memento of the man he had known so briefly. His backpack had also seen better days. Of the three large pockets, only one would hold anything without it dropping out along the way. It was a hand-me-down from his foster brother Rex, who was two years older than Cullen, much bigger and very rough on things. Nearly everything Cullen owned was a hand-me-down from Rex, except for his books and maybe his toothbrush. Those were

his own. He readjusted the backpack so it once again sat squarely on his back. He forced the old paperback into the back pocket of his jeans for easy access later.

Cullen rolled up his pant legs a little too high, so they would not drag along the ground and to hide the frayed ends. He began to walk again. The air felt crisp in his lungs, and he took some pleasure in watching his breath cloud as he exhaled. He picked up a small stick and wedged a fir cone on the end of it. He imagined himself a great wizard on an important quest. He puffed on his makeshift pipe and blew out the “smoke” into the cold air.

Tomorrow, on Halloween, Cullen would turn twelve, the other reason for his unusual happiness that morning; although it kind of sucked that his birthday fell on a Saturday this year. It meant he would have to be home with his foster family, and they were rarely nice. With any luck, he would spend most of the day in the woods with one of his books. Generally, as a grudging birthday treat, the Samuels allowed him to have the day off after his morning chores, as long as he spent it away from them and preferably out of the house. They didn’t like Cullen much, and the feeling was very mutual. Besides, exploring the woods or reading within its protection made a perfect day by Cullen’s definition, so he wouldn’t mind staying away from the house. There would be no reading in the woods today, however, as it was a school day.

Tomorrow might be boring, but there was plenty of excitement just beneath the surface here amongst the redwoods. He felt the magic as he walked through them, like entering Middle-earth or some equally wondrous land. Thick ferns sprouted wherever moisture lingered and complemented the deep brown of the monstrous tree trunks. He figured some of the redwoods measured bigger around than he was tall. He tested that theory sometimes, basking in the feel and the smell of the thick, decades-deep redwood duff beneath the trees. Cullen felt some divinity lived in these woods, gods or elves. He knew when he was here his father and his sister were with him. He wished his mother could feel it, too, but would she even know she was there with him? Best not to think of things you can’t change.

He dropped his impromptu pipe as he cleared the edge of the woods and emerged beside the road. Halfway there. He enjoyed the second part of his commute for a different reason. He could read. His foster parents didn’t let him

read much. They frowned upon it as if it was somehow un-American.

“Normal people watch TV,” they would say to him, but they didn’t complain too much since it kept him out of their hair. They especially didn’t approve of what he read, as they thought there was something satanic about all those strange lands and creatures. Cullen believed in God and Jesus in the same way that he believed the sun rose in the east and noon happened at twelve o’clock. They were just facts in his world view, just another part of reality. He had not yet learned that people create reality for themselves. He also had not yet learned there were other spiritual paths to choose from. One thing he couldn’t believe was that God had anything against fiction. Surely God had more important things to worry about. Cullen loved fantasy, so he read whenever he could. Through his books he fled his unhappy reality and insignificance; he escaped his mundane life. Reading allowed him to be someone important, a noble adventurer saving the world and the people he cared for.

He pulled the book from his back pocket and began reading while he walked alongside the road. Cullen thought it was very easy to read and walk *and* be aware of the traffic around him. Some people would ask in amazement, “You read while you walk?” Cullen would just smile to himself. He couldn’t understand their surprise. He had long since trained himself not to be distracted by the ground whizzing around the pages of the book. Since his arms bounced with the rest of him, he could see the words without them turning into a blur. He could hear the cars passing beside him, so no danger there, as long as the driver watched what they were doing and didn’t reach for a CD or something and swerve off the road. If that were the case, it wouldn’t matter if he were reading or not. Still, he could multi-task in this, as in all things. He found doing just one thing too boring, too monotonous.

The frost slowly melted into the ground, and the sun felt warm through the toque on his head. His jacket started to trap too much heat within its ragged folds, so he unzipped it and took off the hat, holding it in his left hand behind the tattered book. He pushed his glasses up and wiped the sweat from his forehead, making his short dirty-blond hair stick up at strange angles in the front. He failed to notice, since he had stopped caring about his appearance a long time ago. Couldn’t do much about that either. He could only wear what the Samuels gave him to wear. Such was the plight of an eleven, no *twelve*-year-old.

Soon, he faintly heard his fellow students milling around at the Eel River

Community School. A large lawn encompassed by the school bus unloading area kept the main building away from the road. Just across the street, where the school's property and responsibility ended, all the smokers hung out, brought together by the same cancer installment plan and belief in their own indestructibility. A few athletes chased each other over the lawn, tackling and wrestling playfully. Everyone else hung out around the front, waiting for friends to arrive; then they moved inside.

Various students wore costumes for the coming holiday. Cullen watched as a witch and punk rocker crossed the lawn. A gypsy climbed out of a rather large SUV and slammed the door in a huff behind her. Cullen noticed that the pep squad had made a huge orange banner with black lettering demanding a "Happy Halloween" and had draped it over the main entrance.

The Eel River Community School housed grades seven through twelve. Cullen was in the seventh grade, although he was a year younger in age than most of his fellow classmates since he had skipped a year of school. The Samuels had only allowed it because they figured they could get rid of him that much sooner. Also, he received access to his trust, left to him by his father, when he graduated high school. Since he was a year ahead, he would graduate at seventeen. Cullen didn't doubt that the Samuels would take his trust for themselves before he was a legal adult.

His foster brother Rex, two years older and also in the seventh grade, never let him forget what a "nerd" being younger than everyone else made him. Trudy often justified Rex's age by how they "kept him back" due to illness one year. The truth was he failed the third grade, so he was a year behind. He would be fifteen before the end of the school year.

Cullen approached the steps, joining the scores of post-pubescent boys and girls who came together and walked up the stairs into the school. This was the part of school he didn't like—the other kids.

He pushed his glasses back up on his nose. Taking a deep breath, he stepped up onto the stairs and began the trek toward the row of double doors leading into the school. Taunts filled the air around him, but he had gotten good at ignoring them. He was small, young for his grade, and terribly unpopular. He hit the trifecta.

Four large boys approached him. Rex, the biggest and meanest-looking of the

bunch, walked slightly in front of the other three.

Cullen tried to ignore them and wished he was invisible.

“Did you smell something?” Rex asked his friends. They all laughed obediently.

One of his toadies sniffed dramatically. “Yeah, smells like a nerd.”

Cullen just bowed his head and kept walking.

The four boys stopped him from moving forward by placing their combined six hundred pounds of fat in his way.

“Where do you think you’re goin’?” Rex demanded.

“Um, to class,” Cullen replied.

Rex mocked him, “Um, um, um...to class.”

Cullen tried to move around them, but the boys pushed him from one to the other. His glasses fell off, and one of them knocked the well-read paperback from his hands. The cover, barely attached, fell off to the side. The boys all laughed. Mr. Grims, the history teacher, interrupted their fun with a glare. They walked off congratulating each other, instead of continuing their torment, before Mr. Grims could yell at them.

Cullen stooped and picked up his glasses and his book. A small voice spoke above him.

“Why do you let him treat you like that?”

He looked up to see his friend Maddy, followed closely by April. Maddy looked like a gothic princess. She was almost thirteen, and she was beautiful to him. She wore black fishnet stockings full of big holes under a tartan plaid mini-skirt. Red socks disappeared into her black hi-tops, which were dotted with tiny white skulls. Her black bag had a skull on it too, and she wore a black T-shirt that hung off one shoulder, showing the red tank top underneath. Her black bangs hung in a harsh straight line above her cat-green eyes. She was not dressed in costume. In fact, her style had instigated the debates about school uniforms the previous year.

“Hi, Maddy, April.”

Almost the exact opposite from Maddy, April was pretty, too; but in a more wholesome way. Her long blonde hair shone in the early morning sunlight. She

wore a baby blue sweater, blue jeans, and carried a white cane. Cullen could see his reflection in her dark glasses. He quickly flattened his hair into place.

April had been blind since she was a baby. Her mother turned her back for a moment while leaving her pumpkin seat on a bar stool. April shifted or laughed or something, and the pumpkin seat tumbled down with April still strapped inside. She had fallen directly on her head, face down onto the concrete floor. She had only been about six months old, and she hadn't seen a thing since. Although it had been a freak accident, her mother never forgave herself for turning away. Now she overcompensated for her neglect through overindulgence with nice clothes and candy—pretty much whatever April wanted.

Cullen shrugged. "What choice do I have?"

"Stand up for yourself," Maddy offered.

"Kick his little butt," April added.

"Yeah, right." Cullen straightened his glasses and put his book away in his backpack. "That butt weighs more than me. Besides, life is easier if I just keep my head down and take it." Those words held more truth than Cullen wanted to admit. Rex and his parents made life anything but easy.

A pretty young woman with chestnut hair walked past them. Cullen's eyes lit up. He felt the butterflies in his stomach that began to flutter any time Ms. MacFey was nearby.

"Ooooh! Here comes your girlfriend," Maddy teased. Cullen pretended to ignore her. "Hi, Ms. MacFey," Cullen shouted after her.

She turned. "Well, good morning, Cullen. How is my little knight this morning?"

She called him that because his surname was Knight and because he loved reading fantasy. He would do anything for her, just like the stories of the knights and their ladies.

A lanky boy walked by with some girls. "Where's the flood, Knight?"

Cullen blushed. He had forgotten to roll his pants back down after walking through the forest. Mortified, he stooped to do it now.

"Just ignore them, Cullen," Ms. MacFey said gently.

"O-Oh, I do. I really don't even hear it any more." His face blazed red.

Ms. MacFey sighed sympathetically but quickly put on a cheery face. “Okay, kids, have a good day. See you in class—poetry today!”

April and Maddy groaned, but Cullen just beamed at the thought.

Ms. MacFey was their English teacher. Cullen loved it when she read poetry. He had written her a poem, but he wouldn’t show it to anyone, least of all her! English was their last class of the day, and Cullen couldn’t think of a better way to end a school day than listening to Ms. MacFey discuss poetry.

Cullen was not a team player. This had a lot to do with his being the frequent object of overzealous roughness. Being smaller and rather shy (some said skittish) when compared to his classmates, he was often seen more as a target than a participant. This was just one of the reasons he hated P.E. Team sports were for team players, not for outsiders and outcasts.

Maddy joined him in his loathing but took it one step further. She realized she would never fit in, would never be one of the crowd. Furthermore, she never wanted to be, so she took up arms against them, opposing them with her outrageous fashion and utter contempt for normalcy. She took the broadcloth of her exclusion and wove it into a standard of defiance, trumpeting her cause wherever she went.

April was ambivalent. Her blindness set her apart. At the same time, it protected her from the bulk of the teasing and abuse. There was something sacrosanct about a certified disability that sheltered her from the basic cruelty of youth.

Each in their own way was an outcast, unclean in the eyes of their peers. Having nothing else but this in common, they banded together in mutual defense. They made what shift they could on the edges of a group that rejected them, but of which they had to be a part by the dictates of the older generation.

Mrs. Palamore, the Spanish, Computer, and P.E. teacher, recognized that not everyone was suited to team sports. Her policy was to allow anyone not wishing to join the team the option of individual physical training. This involved running laps or going to the weight room. The trio invariably chose the former option. Ambling leisurely around the muddy track, they discussed the events of their lives.

“So, have you asked Maxine to the prom yet?” Maddy asked.

Cullen blushed, looking away without an answer.

“Oh, Maddy,” said April exasperated.

“My name is *Madeline*; I’ve told you to call me Madeline. Everyone knows he has a crush on her, even through she’s almost three times his age.”

April sneered.

Maddy constantly teased Cullen about his puppy love. Blind as she was, April could still see it was more from jealousy than anything else. Maddy didn’t particularly want Cullen for herself, but she was used to his attention. She liked attention from all boys and didn’t like when they gave it to someone else. Any blind girl could see that.

“I just think Ms. MacFey’s cool, that’s all,” mumbled Cullen.

“Yeah,” said Maddy, “cool enough to have your kids.”

“Knock it off,” said April.

“What are you doing for Halloween?” Cullen asked, trying to change the subject.

“I’m going as a bat,” said April. “You know, as in *blind as a...*” She cracked up at her own joke.

“I’m staying home,” declared Maddy. “True evil takes the night off. Too many wannabes out and about. Besides, it’s a full moon so there is a special spell I’m going to try out.”

“I guess that puts me on the side of true evil then,” said Cullen. “I’m on door guard.”

“Hey,” said Maddy, “maybe we’ll stop by and you can give all the candy to us! Then you can knock off early.”

Josh, the only other student in their class who opted for individual training, jogged past them, smiling shyly at Maddy. She ignored him. Unlike the trio, he took his exercise seriously.

“Ooooo!” Cullen teased, “He wants you, Maddy.”

“My name is Madeline!”

“When is the engagement, *Madeline*?” asked April.

“I wouldn’t give that geek the time of day,” huffed Maddy. They continued

their stroll until the bell rang, and then they ambled back into the locker room, laughing and teasing each other.

The final bell rang. All the students sat quietly looking up at Ms. MacFey. She was an excellent teacher, one of the few who the students didn't rebel against. She somehow inspired obedience and respect in her classroom, primarily by showing respect to her students.

"Dismissed," she said.

The entire class simultaneously rushed for their books and things, and began to dash out the door.

Over the noise and rustling she shouted, "Quiz on Monday!" and began to erase the examples of iambic pentameter from the board.

Cullen lingered behind, frequently looking up at his teacher, catching glimpses of heaven incarnate.

Maddy and April approached him, waiting. April held on to Maddy's elbow, who began to tap her foot impatiently. "Are you coming?" Maddy asked.

"Yeah, in a minute," he said.

Maddy rolled her eyes. "Whatever." She tugged April along behind her as she walked out of the class. "Later."

"Bye, Cullen," April said as Maddy pulled her from the classroom.

"Bye," he said a little too late for her to hear. He looked back dreamy-eyed at Ms. MacFey. "Ms. MacFey?"

"Yes, Cullen?" Ms. MacFey asked.

A flush of embarrassment came over him. "Nothing," he mumbled, looking down at his backpack. He slowly put his books away and then began to help put the room back in order. He often did this just to spend a little more time with his favorite teacher. He did have a little crush on her, a confused amalgamation of his approaching puberty and his need for a mother figure in his life.

"You'll miss your bus, Cullen," she said matter-of-factly.

Cullen shrugged. "That's okay," he said, picking up paper from the floor and straightening books on the shelf. "I like to walk home. It gives me more time to

read.”

“Reading any new books?” Ms. MacFey asked.

“Nope, just the same old ones.”

“Which is your favorite again?”

“*The Hobbit*,” Cullen said, immediately thinking of his dad. “I have that and all the Narnia Chronicles at...uh...home.” The thought of *home* made Cullen instantly sad. It was the weekend now, too much time with the Samuels on the weekends for Cullen’s taste.

Not letting him dwell on the thought of home, Ms. MacFey said, “Well, I happen to know that the library just got in some new books, and the librarian made sure to order some new fantasy books just for you. After all, you are her best customer.”

“Wow! That’s great!” Cullen exclaimed. “I hope they got the new Terry Pratchett book. I can’t wait to read it! He’s so funny!”

They finished setting the classroom to rights, and Ms. MacFey looked around with satisfaction. “Well, I guess that’s it. Thanks for your help again, Cullen.”

Cullen smiled faintly and turned to leave.

“Nice work today, too,” she said, as she often did. Cullen was a very good student. All the teachers adored him; he made their thankless jobs a little more satisfying. Teachers dream of students like Cullen who show interest and effort. This, of course, didn’t help his social status with the other kids.

“Thanks,” he replied, blushing slightly. He turned to leave.

“Just a minute, Cullen. I almost forgot,” Ms. MacFey said.

Cullen turned back to face Ms. MacFey. Sometimes on Fridays she brought him some candy or a comic book. She reached down into her desk drawer and took out a brown paper bag, slightly larger than a lunch sack. She reached her hand inside and pulled out some *Lord of the Rings* movie trading cards.

“Wow!” exclaimed Cullen, rushing forward and eagerly taking the cards from Ms. MacFey. “Thanks!”

“And that’s not all!” she said, offering him the rest of the bag. “Here.”

His face stuck in an expression of disbelief. “There’s more?” Reaching into the bag, he pulled out a brand new hardback copy of *The Hobbit*.

“Happy birthday, Cullen,” Ms. MacFey said kindly.

“For me? Really?”

Cullen ran his hand over the green leather binding and the gold edged pages. A dragon, etched in gold, posed majestically on the cover. The Tolkien symbol and title shimmered in gold on the green spine. The gold leaf pages pinched a green satin ribbon that matched the binding. He had never seen such a beautiful book, and he hadn't had a real birthday present since his mom went away.

Don't think of that now. This is a happy moment, hold on to the happiness.

He looked back up at Ms. MacFey. “Thank you. It's so beautiful. How did you know it was my favorite?”

“I've seen that tattered paperback you carry around everywhere and figured you could use a new copy.” She smiled at him, saddened that such little gestures as this were so unusual for him. A tear came to Ms. MacFey's eye, and she quickly turned away saying, “Run along now, Cullen, and you have a happy birthday tomorrow.”

He carefully placed the new book in his shabby backpack and left happier than he had felt in years.

Cullen ran home with his arms spread wide. He felt like flying. He was flying!

When he saw his trail, he ducked into the redwoods like a rabbit rushes into the safety of its burrow. This was the best day of his life! A brand new hardback of *The Hobbit*! He loved *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, too, but he loved *The Hobbit* most of all.

He plucked a long stalk of wild oat straw and wove it into a ring. “My *precioussss*,” he hissed, as he slipped it onto his finger to vanish from the sight of all those who tormented him.

Walking as silently as a hobbit, he came upon his favorite part of the forest. He still had some time before dinner, so never too anxious to get home, he strayed from the trail and walked through the silent forest to his favorite tree. In the mornings, the mist gathered the thickest here beneath the largest tree he had ever seen. It must have been thousands of years old! Easily twelve feet in diameter, it marked the center of Nature's temple. Yet it was but one tree in a

ring of them that had started out as suckers of a much larger and older tree that had disappeared millennia ago, leaving a clear floor where it had once been. Cullen liked to hide out in this ancient grove and read whenever he could get away from home. He planned on being here most of the weekend. With any luck he could swing it and have a peaceful birthday.

He sat down at the base of the largest tree, next to the opening of its inner chamber, and felt the hardness of the trunk behind him. The tiny cones and twigs crunched as he settled in the thick duff. Looking up, the trees reached up to the heavens, forming a protective barrier all around him. He felt the safest here, as if nothing could ever hurt him again—his fortress from the malice of the outside world. He ran his hands over the strange and marvelous markings around the opening of the natural cave within its massive trunk. These grooves on the trunk seemed almost natural, as there were certainly no clear forms or letters among them. They looked like scratches, like formulated abrasions. Cullen believed these odd marks were left there by an ancient traveler, marking this sacred spot. They looked like a series of lines intersecting another, longer line. This was one of the many reasons he loved it here.

He placed the Batman backpack down in front of him and reverently took out his new hardback book. He ran his hand over the embossed cover before opening it. On the title page were the tiny figures of a wizard, a hobbit, and thirteen dwarves questing through a wild landscape. Cullen sighed, cherishing the best birthday present he had ever received. Well, ever since that horrible day. The last day he saw his mother, his sister, or his father. He hadn't had many good days after that one, but this day topped the list. Definitely.

He snuggled back in a fold of the gigantic trunk and began to read. The time slipped away, and before he knew it, he strained to see the words in the fading light. He jumped up when he realized how late it was, shoved the new book deep in his backpack and ran back toward the trail. He nearly tripped over a formation of neatly piled stones, stacked like a little castle. He knew this forest as well as he knew his books, but he hadn't noticed that pile of stones before. *Strange*, he thought, with the small portion of his brain not occupied with the fear of being late.

Breathless, he finally cleared the edge of the forest and saw the Samuels' house down the slight hill. It was actually a manufactured home that had been

driven to its current location on the back of a huge semi and superficially made to look like a charming cottage. A wooden lattice covered the space between the ground and the bottom of the house. A wooden deck, made from the same trees that surrounded the property, met the front door. Three steps led up to the old aluminum screen door that muted the autumn colors on the seasonal wreath hanging behind it on a white metal door. A half-moon shaped window on the otherwise solid front door let in little natural light.

He climbed the stairs slowly, not wanting to go inside. Fantasy time had ended. Now he had to face reality.

The interior of the glorified trailer gave an indication of the kind of people who lived there. The plastic strips that covered the seams reminded Cullen of band-aids hiding blemishes. A bland layer of thin plastic also covered the walls in place of real wallpaper, increasing the feeling of sterility. His foster mom, Trudy, could literally sponge down the walls to clean them, which she often did—or had Cullen do.

The décor was somewhere between the charmless Americana of country living and the rigidity of a deeply religious home. On the top of a cabinet that held an old fashioned TV was a pair of hands, pressed together in prayer. Another set of hands sat next to it, a plaster cast of a very large hand holding a very small one mounted on a piece of marble. A small gold plaque nestled in its ivory base read: “Dad & Son, Richard’s 1st Birthday.” That was Rex’s real name—Richard, but he had gone by Rex since before Cullen’s arrival. On the other side of the praying hands, past a paste tiara, stood what looked like an open ceramic book. The poem *Footsteps* trailed down one page in its uneven lines, and a picture of a footprint-speckled beach covered the other.

Several pictures of Rex growing up through the years and pictures with his parents, Frank and Trudy, dotted the walls. No one but Rex looked particularly happy in the pictures. Rex didn’t look happy, so much as pleased with himself. Frank and Trudy always smiled, but there was no happiness in their eyes. Instead, their eyes betrayed two miserable people keeping up appearances with their empty grins.

The modest sofa had an intricate floral pattern in pastel colors. A matching floral arrangement blossomed in the center of the coffee table. The flowers looked so real, only a touch would betray their bogus blooms. Frank’s dark brown recliner ruined the otherwise sterile cheeriness of the room.

The family sat at the dinner table in the kitchen. They didn't have a separate dining room, something Trudy often complained about. She wanted to entertain, and she would yell at Frank for not making more money. Frank would coldly remind his wife that no one liked her, so who would she entertain? Then she would pour herself some of her "ginger ale." Everyone knew what it really was, but you never told her. No, that would just make her even angrier, make her drink even more. When she was good and drunk and angry, she would get to preaching. Even Frank went out of his way to avoid that. She liked to drink her "ginger ale" from a martini glass, because it made her feel sophisticated. Cullen rarely saw her without it.

Frank worked long hours, though not long enough according to Trudy, at the local logging company. Fortuna had a huge logging industry, and Cullen believed Frank took special pleasure in cutting down the trees that had been alive for centuries. It was more than that. Frank was proud of it, saying it demonstrated the power and elevation of Man over all other life. Frank always got caught up in power struggles, and he didn't let go easily. He was just like a bulldog. His sagging jowls gave him the looks to match.

The dining family all glanced up at him and then went back to their food. They continued eating as if he wasn't there.

"Sorry I'm late," Cullen said.

Frank grunted.

"You're lucky you're not any later," Trudy said. "Dinner is almost over,"

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Cullen said, as he sat down at the table.

"Don't forget to say grace first," she added. "Be grateful to Him for your meal, even if you're not grateful to us."

Rex continued talking with an unfriendly sideways glance, as if Cullen had interrupted an interesting story. "*Anyway*, like I was saying, I tripped the little spaz. He actually started *crying!*"

Cullen took a small helping and put it on his plate. There wasn't much left. He ate in silence with his head lowered. Rex roared with laughter.

"That's nice, dear," Trudy said, sipping from her martini glass, already a little too tipsy to follow the conversation.

"That will teach him, my boy!" Frank beamed. "He won't be refusing to help

you any more!”

“As if I need his stupid help!” Rex slapped Cullen on the head. “Not when I have my own nerd for a *brother*.”

Cullen just continued eating, silently.

Trudy chimed in, her words already slurring slightly, “Cullen, you help Rex tonight with his math.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Trudy turned to Rex. “We’re putting your costume together tomorrow, right?”

“Trick or treating is for kids, Mom,” Rex replied.

“You’ll have a great time. You always do.”

But all the kids he torments and steals candy from won’t, Cullen thought, knowing better than to say anything like that out loud.

“Alright,” Rex said with a sly smile, as if he could read Cullen’s mind.

“It’s a date!” Trudy exclaimed happily, sloshing her “ginger ale” on the table.

Cullen ate quickly so that he would be finished by the time everyone else began leaving the table. When they did, abandoning their dirty dishes without concern, Trudy snapped, “Cullen, clean the table and do the dishes.”

Cullen knew. He had had to clean the table every evening for six years now. Ever since he came to live with the Samuels. He gathered the empty plates and took them to the sink to wash them.

3

Cullen lay awake, staring at the wall from the lower tier of the bunk bed in his dark room. He rarely lay on his back, mostly because he hated to look at the bulging mattress of the bunk above him, knowing that Rex was in it. If he looked at the wall, he could imagine he was in his tree-cave, safe from his tormentors. Lying on his side also allowed him to curl into a fetal ball, leaving as little of his body as possible exposed to the slings and arrows of the cruel world in which he lived.

Although still awake, he dreamed. His innermost desires came together to

make sweet daydreams of fantasy. They danced through his head, taking him on adventures far from his unhappy, mundane life. In these dreams of escape, he led faithful friends to accomplish dangerous tasks that would make the world a better place for all. Rarely did he get specific about what that task entailed. The details only got in the way.

On this particular night, he dreamed of rescue. At the hour when he turned twelve, he would come into his inheritance. In his fantasy, a wizard from the magical world to which he really belonged would come for him. He would be hailed as a Prince of the Realm when he arrived. He would be surrounded and looked after by new friends. At his request, April and Maddy would be brought to share in his good fortune. The wizard would give April her sight back. She would see him for the first time and know she loved him. With that happy thought, he drifted into sleep.

As it turned out, no one rescued Cullen that night. Waking early, before anyone else—including the sun—he carefully removed his new book from under his mattress and began to read it by the light of his flashlight within his blanket grotto. For a time, he lost himself once again within Middle-earth.

As the last traces of the darkness began to fade, he hid the book and flashlight back under his mattress and got up to quietly dress. He always kept the next day's clothes folded neatly under his bed, so he wouldn't have to go through his footlocker and risk waking Rex, who would yell loud enough to wake Trudy and Frank. They would then storm into the room and scold him for disturbing the peace of the household. Best to avoid the entire business.

He dressed quickly and slipped quietly out the door, heading to the kitchen to make breakfast. It was the one chore he didn't mind doing, since it allowed him to get a good meal inside him without anyone being the wiser. Not that they didn't feed him, it just never filled him quite enough. He was always served last, just after Rex, who generally left only a token portion for him. He wouldn't have left even that if Trudy didn't make him. She always made sure Cullen never had anything serious to complain about to his social worker. It was probably the only reason why Trudy or Frank never hit him, although Rex more than made up for their lack of physical punishment. Rex's abuse could be shrugged off as boys just being boys, so they never discouraged his violence.

By the time Trudy arrived in the kitchen with her robe cinched tightly around

her nightgown, Cullen had made the coffee and set the table. Simultaneously, the bacon sizzled in the microwave, the toast smoldered in the toaster, and the eggs crackled in the frying pan. Trudy gazed around the kitchen to see that Cullen had everything under control and on time before grunting her lack of disapproval. She seated herself to be served a strong cup of coffee, which she counted on in the morning to chase away the lingering effects of her nightly martinis. She normally had dark circles under her eyes, but in the mornings they looked positively sunken.

Frank arrived soon after and seated himself without a word, picking up the newspaper that had been laid out for him beside his plate. Cullen had fetched it while the coffee brewed and had already read the comics before carefully refolding it. Frank would get apoplectic if he thought someone had read the paper before him. He hated the idea of someone knowing more than he did, which in Cullen's opinion, wasn't too hard to accomplish.

Trudy dared to interrupt his newspaper-gazing. "Since you're having bacon and eggs this morning, dear, it's salad for lunch. Remember what the doctor said."

Cullen froze, awaiting the wrath.

Frank's stubby fingers slowly lowered the newspaper and revealed his plump face, red with rage. He wore metal framed glasses with square lenses. Even when he took them off, there was a permanent indentation where the arms of the glasses squeezed into the abundant flesh of his shaved head. His ears rested in large dimples, surrounded by so much lard. He looked up at Trudy, making a few rolls appear on the back of his neck. "Give me a friggin' break! It's too early in the morning for this, *dear*."

"You've got to lower your cholesterol. The doctor said."

Frank slammed the newspaper down on the table, making Cullen and Trudy both jump. Rex was still asleep. He didn't get up until noon on Saturdays.

"I swear to God, woman, don't push me. I didn't climb to the top of the food chain to eat rabbit food. End of discussion."

Cullen thought it unlikely for Frank to climb to the top of an anthill, let alone the food chain, since he couldn't even see his feet beneath his massive belly. Frank glared at Trudy through his squinty eyes, until satisfied she wouldn't nag

him any more.

Trudy got up and made herself a screwdriver.

Frank took a deep breath, twisting his bottom lip against his teeth in a contorted grimace. "Tell me I'm wrong. I'm totally serious...tell me I'm wrong!"

Cullen ate in silence.

Frank picked up the newspaper again like nothing happened. He grumbled from the other side of it. "You have to out talk 'em. The only reason women win so many arguments is because they talk more. They never shut up. Tell me I'm wrong."

Trudy sipped her screwdriver.

Cullen kept his eyes down on his food.

"Well," Frank said, after flipping through the local section, "it looks like the commie air quality control board's finally allowed us a burn day." He pointed at Cullen with his eyes. "You better get those leaves raked up and burned while you can."

Cullen hid a sigh. They hadn't even mentioned his birthday, no surprise there. It looked as if he wouldn't get the day off after all.

Cullen didn't really mind burning leaves. He could stand close to the fire to keep warm, and it allowed him to be out of the house. After washing the breakfast dishes, he headed to the tool shed with a quick side trip to his room for an old *Ozma of Oz* paperback that Maddy had given him before she turned Goth.

He loaded up the wheelbarrow with a rake, pitchfork, and a propane torch. Soon afterwards, he stood close enough to a pile of burning leaves to benefit from its warmth. The pitchfork—its handle taller than him—leaned against his shoulder; and his book, propped open in his hand, pulled him into its magical tale. He soon became so engrossed in his reading that he failed to hear Frank angrily walking up behind him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing!?" he shouted, his face bursting red with rage. He stomped on a small line of fire leading away from the main burn pile. "You're out here to get a job done, not to read this garbage!"

He snatched the book from Cullen's startled hands and tossed it into the

flames. Cullen gave a cry of despair before he could stop himself.

“Well, I see something can get through that thick skull of yours after all!” Frank said, as his bottom lip flattened against his teeth in that sadistic grin.

He stormed back into the house, leaving Cullen to stare dismally at the burning remains of his book. Did he dare pull it out of the fire? He sighed with resignation and let it burn. Frank was probably secretly watching him to see if he would do just that. Cullen hoped he would stay gone for a while. He stayed very still, except to tend to the fire. He didn’t want to give Frank an excuse to come back outside.

Frank, however, returned just a few minutes later carrying a cardboard box. With horror, Cullen realized it contained all of his books. Frank dropped it on the ground next to the fire.

“I’ve had enough of these books,” he spat. “Life isn’t a fairy tale, and it’s high time you learned that. And no more dilly-dallying after school either. From now on, you come home with Rex every day. You need to learn some responsibility.”

Cullen looked at him, confused.

“Well, go on,” Frank said.

Cullen’s confusion gave way to desperation as he realized what Frank wanted him to do. Not his books. Anything but his books.

“Throw them on, one at a time, and watch them burn.”

“But, sir,” Cullen pleaded, “please...”

“Do it, boy. I’m not playing around.”

Cullen looked up into Frank’s face, and he saw that he was completely serious. He also saw a glimmer of joy sparkle in his eyes, even though his face held its normal scowl. He must know what torture this was for Cullen, and he was enjoying it. A distant thought in the back of Cullen’s mind felt pity for a man so miserable in his own life that he must destroy everything around him. But that fleeting thought quickly dissipated at the reality of what he must do.

Cullen approached the fire and tossed the first book on: *The Two Towers*. He watched it slowly burn as Frank stoked the fire. He threw *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* on the fire next. One after another he watched them burn, blinking back the tears in his eyes. He wouldn’t let Frank see him cry. He

wouldn't give him the satisfaction. This was the worst birthday ever.

"That one, too," Frank said as Cullen clutched his tattered copy of *The Hobbit* to his chest.

"Please, sir, let me keep just this one. My father gave it to me."

"Not a chance. It's time you stopped daydreaming, boy, and learned about the real world. It's not all magic and fun. Life is hard work and pain. Tell me I'm wrong!"

Frank only scowled as tears filled Cullen's imploring eyes. "Don't make me come over there and throw it in for you. I swear to God, you don't want me to have to do that."

"No, sir, I wouldn't," Cullen said quietly.

He dropped the book on the smoldering fire. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't stop the tears from spilling over his lashes as he watched the pages blacken and curl. He felt his life burn in that fire, the only thing that made living bearable, destroyed. Fire, again, took what he held most dear.

Suddenly, a new hope blossomed within his soul as he remembered the new hardback book still under his mattress. A warm rush of joy entered him and splashed across his face like cool water on a hot summer's day. He masked his joy immediately by bowing his head and covering his face, just as Frank looked up at him again. That was too close! He couldn't let Frank see even the slightest glimmer or happiness, or he would know he missed one. Frank didn't know about the book Ms. MacFey had given him, and Cullen would now have to find a better hiding place for it.

He did his best to stay out of the way of Trudy and Rex that Halloween day. He had always thought it would be really cool to have a birthday on Halloween, but nothing was really cool about living with the Samuels.

Trudy doted on Rex like a small child. The two of them made his pirate costume together. Trudy had even gotten him some really cool black boots. She and Frank planned on going out tonight themselves, so Cullen had to stay and give candy out to the kids. Fine with him! He preferred being alone, especially if the alternative was the Samuels.

The Samuels left for their Halloween party after a stern warning against any foolishness. Trudy finished up the last of her martini and shoved the empty

glass in Cullen's hands. She liked to get an early start on the festivities.

Rex left soon thereafter dressed as a pirate, giving Cullen a slap upside his head on his way out the door.

Once they were gone, Cullen ran to his bedroom and looked under the mattress. Sure enough, the new book Ms. MacFey had given him was right where he left it. All was not lost! He tucked it away deep in the corner so it couldn't easily be seen, just in case. Tonight, after everyone was asleep, he had to find a good hiding place for it—one that no one would ever find.

The hours crept by as the trick-or-treaters drove up with their parents in their colorful costumes. There was never more than fifteen minutes between groups all evening, but Cullen didn't mind too much. He, at least, was alone. He smiled when he opened the door at the little kids and some his age, too. Some even from his school, but they didn't chide him now because he controlled the candy! He didn't mind not being part of the fun out there, not too much anyway. April and Maddy didn't come by after all. He bet that April looked adorable in her blind bat costume. He wondered what spell Maddy cast tonight. What required a full moon? He couldn't wait to see them again on Monday and share stories.

Late that night—well past eleven o'clock—Rex snored soundly, hugging his plastic Jack-o-lantern full of candy, most of which he had bullied away from smaller kids. Cullen watched the Batman clock and stayed quiet until the entire house slept. The clock emitted the time on the ceiling in a beam of light, like the Bat Signal. He had been officially twelve for nearly a full day. What a horrible birthday it had been, his worst ever. When the Bat Signal showed 11:45, he figured it was probably safe to sneak out. The house was silent.

He pulled the small flashlight and his new book from under the corner of his mattress and crept outside. Once he walked a safe distance from the house, he broke into a full run toward the forest. He wasn't taking any chances on being caught. He had to be quick. The full moon shone brightly, lighting the path before him. He didn't need the flashlight until he reached the cover of the trees. Even at night, with the light from his tiny flashlight reflecting off the heavy mist, Cullen ran as gracefully as a deer over the stumps and through the trees until he reached his secret grove. Stooping down before his favorite tree, the greatest of the redwoods, he crawled inside the chamber created by its split

trunk.

He dropped his book and began to dig frantically with a flat stone he found nearby. He needed to get back as soon as possible in case Rex woke up and saw him gone. He couldn't risk what would happen to him then. As he dug deeper the mist thickened and the wind picked up, finding its way inside the chamber and blowing his sandy hair into a big tangle.

He looked outside at the full moon peeking through the tops of the giant trees. The sky was completely clear that night. Clear and cold. Clouds came in from nowhere and covered the moon. The familiar fear deep in his stomach began to rise into his throat and choke him. He dug faster. The stone hit something hard in the earth; he thought it to be a root. He reached down to it and found a piece of wood not attached to the tree. It was loose. He picked it up and looked at it in wonder.

"A magic wand!" he exclaimed, as he examined the strange knotty piece of wood. It was about as long as his arm from fingertip to elbow.

The wind died down as suddenly as it had picked up, and the clouds moved away from the moon. The wind didn't fully stop, however. It *whispered*. All the trees were whispering in harmony with the wind and the stars and all life around him. They whispered, "*Seann*."

"What?" Cullen asked out loud, in spite of himself.

They whispered again, "*Seann, Seann, Seann–Daonnan Seann*."

"*Daonnan Seann?*" Cullen asked.

Was he hearing things? That didn't make any sense! But as soon as he spoke the words aloud, the wind whipped into a frenzy around him, blowing much more fiercely than ever. A huge bolt of lightning cracked directly above the grove. He jumped out of the tree and screamed, opening his hand to drop his wand; but it didn't fall. It stuck like glue. He tried to shake it off, but it wouldn't budge. Terror filled him, body and mind.

The wand in his hand began to grow. First, it sprouted vines and wrapped around his hand, then it began to crawl up his arm. Cullen fell to the ground in utter terror, thoughts of alien invasion throttling his senses. His mind raced and he screamed inside his head, but it didn't reach his mouth. He was too scared to even scream. Up and up his arm the vines grew. They felt cool and

warm at the same time, as they snaked through Cullen's jacket. When they reached his throat, they spread out down his chest and back and around his neck. Now Cullen really panicked. He would choke to death! He would die out here, alone! No one would find him. He would rot here alone. He desperately clawed at the vines around his throat with his free hand, feeling them squeeze the breath out of him.

Then they were gone.

The wind stilled.

The sky cleared.

The forest was silent.