

32.

FREWELLA GROVE

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Chapter One

The elves were playing a game of skill when the clerics came. It was simple enough – one side started in the centre of the checked board, its small number of warrior pieces determined to escort the king piece off the edge. The other, more numerous side, would begin at the edges and swarm in, hoping to swamp their outnumbered foe. They had played all afternoon in the branches above the well. Red-gold leaves drifted from dark limbs, building a rich drapery below.

Listaelf was losing so felt relief when black-clad figures approached over the rise to the north, the sun blazing upon their faces. He pointed and laughed, accidentally-on-purpose upsetting the board, sending pieces cascading to the leaves layered below. Wilda scowled and flung her fist at his head, blackening Listaelf's eye. He rolled backward along the branch cursing, and Wilda smirked happily to herself. Then she too saw the black-clad shapes. Even at this range she could hear their droning voices and see their downcast faces. They cut stark figures, pasty complexions robed in shadowy dress.

Listaelf and Wilda were wights of the land, descendants of the folk of Aelfhama, at one with the pulse of the world about them. They were servants of Earth, of the goddess Freo, and warded her well at Frewella Grove. Folk of the Angles and Saxons came to offer apples and coloured cloth at the well, and their goddess would give them health and good fortune. It had been this way for many years, and Listaelf and Wilda had often watched from the trees of the Grove, curling oaks with knowing grins. Now their strong limbs clung tightly to the eaves of the trees as they spied on the approaching strangers.

“Listaelf,” whispered Wilda, “do you think they are in mourning, with those long faces?”

“Wilda,” hissed Listaelf without looking back at her, “they must have some awful burden to bear. Perhaps their goddesses and gods have abandoned them?”

They fell silent as the bleak entourage halted amid the ground's leafy shroud.

The men formed two circles around Freo's well. Coloured ribbons brightened the branches that hung low over the crystalline liquid. An apple core, black from rot, lay near its edge.

The leader of the dreary band raised his bloated hands to the sky. He began chanting in a whirling language, the words ghostly to sensitive elven ears:

*“Pater noster, qui es in caelis,
sanctificetur nomen tuum.
Adveniat regnum tuum.
Fiat voluntas tua, sicut in caelo et in terra.
Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie,
et dimitte nobis debita nostra sicut
et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris.
Et ne nos inducas in tentationem,
sed libera nos a malo.
Amen.”*

Listaelf and Wilda stared at each other. Could this strange performance be a religious ceremony? They gawked at the dark figures, whose bearing and demeanour seemed in poor taste compared with the beauty of Frewella Grove.

Several of the men unpacked gold spheres attached to long silver chains. They struck flints over a candle, put the flame into each of the orbs. Soon a grey smoke wafted from the globes, choking the naked oak limbs. Listaelf and Wilda pressed their narrow hands to their faces, struggling not to inhale the wretched stuff. They wished they had brought their bows with them – a few rounds of maliciously intended elfshot would have sent these irritating interlopers to their sickbeds for good.

But they had not been expecting to need their war gear, only their board game. After all, who would bring strife upon a well sacred to Earth?

The leader of the band succumbed to the stink of the censor smoke. He coughed and choked and hacked and then spat a disgusting thick lump of goo into the well. Listaelf and Wilda hissed and seethed. It was a foul deed done.

The leader raised his hands again: “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and under the light of the Blessed Virgin, I hereby abjure all the evil doings of Satan from this Grove, and exorcise this water in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen! Out ye spirits of darkness! Out ye demons of flame and corruption! Out ye thoughts of wrongful deeds! Out ye forces of sinful licence! Get ye gone, thou grotesque forces of earthly evil!”

The elves' mouths hung open.

“In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” (the others chorused '*Amen!*'); “I dedicate this well to the holy Saint Fredeswinda, Lady of Thomwry Wode! May her benevolent love be revealed as the true power of this well, and may the people leave her offerings as befits a saint of Our Lord Jesus Christ!” (*Amen!* again rang ragged).

“From today, all who dare leave offerings to the old devils of this place, all who dare name their disgusting names, will be known and sent hurtling to the dark halls of HELL!”

“From this day, in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” (*Amen!*), “we name this place *Fredeswella* Grove, to mark the total transformation of its place and power in the world! Let all behold, by the power of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” (*Amen!*), “it is no longer a well for Satanic offerings to the heathen forces of carnal diabolism, but a well for Holy offerings to St Fredeswinda's blessed bestowals of luck! All praise to Our Lord Jesus Christ!” (*Amen!*)

His climax reached, the leader turned and marched off, leaves hissing about his feet and robe. The others slowly shuffled after him, moaning and chanting the strange language that their leader had initially intoned.

“What was all that about?” asked Listaelf.

“I think”, opined Wilda sagely, “that they are trying to steal Freo's Well because of this Our Lord Jesus Christ (*Amen*) character. He seems to have made them all very depressed and confused.”

Chapter Two

The sun slipped away and was reborn again several times over before Listaelf and Wilda heard anything more of humankind. In the days following the strange visitation, they floated back into the sorrowful reverie of autumn's suicide. They tended to the Grove, fished out leaves that had fallen into the well, whispered charms to ensure the health of the trees during the fearful freeze ahead. Although the incident with the strange men in black had unsettled them, they were not flighty spirits of cloud or stream. They were the kin of ancient trees: slow to act and unhurried in judgement.

One day, the ground soaked by cloudy sorrow, a pair of local women wended

their way into the Grove. Listaelf and Wilda sensed their presence immediately from the trees. This time they had their bows, and kept them close at hand as they spied upon the new arrivals.

The women were of peasant stock, strongly built, features marked by years of sun and shower. Clad in layers of linen, arms loaded with baskets, they looked about warily, trusting their shrewd eyes to betray any lurking dangers.

Listaelf and Wilda moved silently from bough to bough, bows hung from their shoulders, earthy skins blending with the dark oak tree bark. Their eyes, slitted suspiciously upon the supplicants, keenly sought for any hint of concealed mischief. The trees sighed in the wind, dripping rain water to the earth below, the sky a brooding mess of grey and blue.

Rivulets flowed like veins on the gracious limbs of the trees, their fingers coiled about the sky itself, holding the vault of the heavens aloft. Their roots, gnarled and strong, coursed deep into the earth, exchanging nourishment with the land. Listaelf and Wilda could feel the trees' many heartbeats in the whispering silence, and below the peasant women began to do the same.

The two visitors slowed their passage as they neared the well. The ancient presence that pervaded the Grove soothed their blood and bones, restoring them to nature's hold. Their faces softened now, as the elves moved languidly above them from branch to branch, the building charge of magic spiralling in their veins. The elves felt what the trees felt – these women had come to express their respect and love for the well and the Grove. Listaelf and Wilda relaxed the cruel arms of their bows and watched.

The women approached the well with reverence, each clad in cold silence. They rode to their knees before the stillness of the water and lowered their baskets to the leafy bed that garbed the ground. They unveiled their offerings – bright red apples, gleaming fresh, and colourful ribbons of costly cloth. Listaelf and Wilda were concerned to notice a third set of objects – a pouch from which hard nails poked.

What significance could this jarring presence have? Trees do not like nails, which weary wood with biting thrust. The well would not like to be filled with the poison of rusting steel. The earth could bear a little of her ore to be torn from her flesh, for her children could not otherwise easily survive. But she did not desire to have the sharp points reburied in her skin like splinters.

Listaelf restrung his bow with a swift gesture. Wilda cast him a warning glance, and they stared suspiciously on.

One of the women raised the basket of apples over her head as she knelt. “I offer this nourishment in the name of my poor child, sickened and worried by the fangs of ill. I ask for his sore limbs to be calm in health, and his wrecked airs to be made amends.”

Then the other woman spoke. She had been tying coloured strands of cloth to the branches that hung about the well, the bright strips bringing good hue to the place. “Please provide us this gift for a gift, oh Great Lady Fre-o-uh”, she stumbled, “*Holy Saint Fredeswinda*” her companion whispered hoarsely in her ear, “um, and to Our Lord Jesus Christ (*Amen*) our call of forgiveness and healing, uh, as well.”

Both women trembled, and the holder of fruit lowered the basket again, uncertain in her movement. The air struck from the clearing; an eerie silence replaced the calm that had soothed the Grove before. The trees seemed suddenly rough and ill fitting about the women, and they burst into sobs as they spread the apples before the well.

“Forgive us,” one of them whispered. Listaelf and Wilda, perched high above, stared, speechless. One of the women raised a fistful of nails above the well, her hand trembling. Her companion sobbed sadly at the sorry sight. Suddenly she withdrew the nails and dropped them with disgust into the bag that had borne them here.

The shame-faced supplicants gathered themselves and walked away from the well, their clothes wet where they had been pressed to the leaves. They passed beyond the threshold of the Grove, no longer as welcoming as it had been. Their shoulders sagged and their eyes hardened. Something was lost in their hedging over names and nails. The Grove had not denied them, and indeed the woman's son would recover by the Earth's blessing. But these forced changes struck foul against their hearts. These two would never return to the well.

Listaelf and Wilda frowned as their visitors left the Grove. They rode the arms of the trees, slid down their trunks, and came to sit by the water of the well. The animals of the Grove were gathering to share in the offerings of apple, and Wilda hugged a squirrel as it aggressively munched on a morsel.

“There's no other possibility,” asserted Listaelf suddenly. “Those buffoons in black are the root of this misery! We need to do something about this Our Lord Jesus Christ (*Amen*) character. His followers are ruining the magic of this place for the folk that most need it!”

“You're right, Listaelf,” Wilda declared sternly as she lowered her furry friend to the earth again. “Let us find their bloated buffoon of a leader and extract a *very* good explanation from him.”

Resolute, the elves equipped themselves with bows of yew, soft walking shoes, and stout packs for the short journey to the village. The Grove sadly bade them farewell as they journeyed into the forested flat within which it resided. Oak leaves silently sailed to the wet ground in the wake of their passage, lamenting this second winter.

Chapter Three

They marched through the grey-daubed countryside with grim expressions, a martial air guiding their movements. As the sun soared, the wolf snapping at her heels, the clouds crowded heavily over the rim of the sky. Listaelf and Wilda had not left the holy grounds of the Grove in many years, and they were startled by the changes wrought in the wider world.

There was an atmosphere of sorrow, as though something precious had been lost or stolen. They could see it in the weary gaits of other wanderers; in the silence-slung hills; in the streams that crossed their paths, gurgling sadly. Occasionally, but not nearly so frequently as in past times, they would see other land spirits – mooning alone on a striking hill, sheltered beneath a canopy of trees, lurking and leery beneath a stone bridge. The custodians of nature seemed burdened.

“Perhaps,” opined Wilda, “the folk that shared largess with these holy places have stopped. Could this Our Lord Jesus Christ (*Amen*) character have disturbed the bond that the folk have with the land? The earth and the waters that live with the people seem starved of love.”

“Perhaps,” pondered Listaelf, “our own Grove has been spared this suffering because we see few humans. Its strength remains directly drawn from Earth. But where the land spirits once dealt daily with the folk, they now suffer.”

“Let us not forget the sorrow etched in the figure of every farmer we pass, either. This sadness has struck the humans as well,” reminded Wilda.

As the sun neared the end of her long ride across the sky, the elves reached the town they sought. It had grown over the years, and unfamiliar fields surrounded it, though now naked from the harvest tide.

What took their attention was the newest addition to the village, a brooding

stone structure looming over the village's wood and thatched homes. It clutched cold darkness. A large bell perched atop a pointed spire at one end of the crude building.

Listaelf and Wilda crept into the village, dodging carts and horses, moving among bushes and the branches of trees. The townsfolk seemed very subdued as they busied themselves with preparations for winter's onslaught. It was as though no one spoke too loudly on pain of punishment.

The elves stalked easily through the village. Everywhere they listened and looked for local land spirits, but they found nothing more than a scattered handful of house gnomes, a silent and stony bunch at best. Some of the local gnomes seemed particularly nasty, as though some fester infected them. The elves did not pause to parley with them, but remembered when the house wights of this place were renowned for their high spirits.

Listaelf and Wilda drew nearer to the church, the great stone structure. It was cold to the touch, and the elves felt unsettled by its silence. Narrow windows dotted the walls, but they were too high for the elves to peer into. They guessed that these were for the benefit of sunlight, not lookers in. Although the front doors stood open, Listaelf and Wilda were not eager to plunge into the dark and musty place.

Above the door hung a startling carving – a malnourished young fellow, his hacked-out wounds liberally daubed with red paint, nailed to a piece of wood. It seemed to them a sad image, one that encouraged its viewer to give up on life. Or possibly, its message was a warning. The elvish visitors looked at the sorrow that lay about them and saw its reflection in the man on the cross.

By the time they had finished inspecting the building night had fallen, and a mightily cold mist descended over the land. The clouds thickened with dusk and no stars hung in the sky. The elves retreated to an empty loft and resolved to sleep the night away. They planned to approach the stone hall at dawn. They did not doubt that this dour place was the home of the blustering human who had claimed their sacred well. They munched without enthusiasm on a cold dinner, wrapped themselves in straw, and hugged one another into chilly sleep with the mice and the spiders.

Chapter Four

The clashing cries of brass against brass saw the elves bolt upright and panicked the next morn. Straw flew about them as they tumbled, terrified, into a corner of

the loft, backs braced against the wall. The tremendous peals struck again and again, sending the elves' teeth chattering and skin prickling. It was an awful din, dissonant and harsh. The crashing washed over their bodies, pummelling their limbs, banging bone against bone. Brute terror overwhelmed the creatures, who staggered desperately about, clutching their ears, moaning in agony.

The noise passed, the elves collapsing into relief. Listaelf and Wilda slowly dragged themselves to their feet, bewildered, stumped by what could cause such a cacophony. They tumbled out of the loft and blundered into the morning light, where a miserable drizzle splattered all surfaces in sight. Blearily, they began to notice the entire folk of the village were milling outside the church, waiting patiently in the rain to enter, heads bowed, as though each were personally grovelling. Listaelf spotted that the brass church bell was swaying slightly.

“Could that have been the source of that awful noise?” he wondered, as Wilda rubbed her eyes and stared. “No wonder there are no land spirits around here! If that sort of thing happens often they'd all have sodded off to the deep of the wilds! It's dreadful!”

“Typical that only house gnomes would remain,” reflected Listaelf. “Little buggers are cast from clay and deaf as a doddering geezer.”

“And even those left seem grumpy grouches,” rejoined Wilda.

After some hesitation they resolved, through ringing ears, to follow the folk into the hall. They felt some revulsion, and not a little resistance, as they entered the place. It was as though the air thickened to deny them passage. The folk were gathered on long benches below a deep ceiling, with agonised sculptures, similar to the one above the entrance, poised about the place. Wilda saw a basin of water near the entrance and wondered whether it had powers similar to the one at Frewella Grove. She sniffed it and grimaced. It smelt only of mould. The water had no spirit at all.

A stage filled the front of the hall, and on it stood the fellow who had tried to steal the Grove's magic. He was dressed richly in black and red, with gold on his fingers and around his neck. A number of his underling acolytes, clad in much plainer dress, stood by, waving censers or clutching staves. The perfume sickened the elves, and the pallor of the gathering seemed to sink as the gas ghosted about the chamber. Hiding behind a pillar, the elves waited for the last of the village folk to file in. They wondered how the people could want to be in a place that stank of corruption and sickness. Even packed, the hall felt empty.

The head man's lackeys began singing in a dreary drone, each lost in his own

dissonant dirge (the elves wondered where all the priestesses were). Gradually, the assembly added its voice to the sludgy sound, until the place sung a weary song. The elves covered their ears and grimaced, wondering what other crimes against music these people could commit.

Finally, the droning drifted off into silence. The black-clad leader stood tall at the front of the gathering, raising his arms to gain the full attention of the audience. He began to chant in the twisted language that he had used at the Grove, occasionally accompanied by his underlings. This went on for quite a while, the priest poring over a huge text from time to time. The assembly, previously morose, began to settle into slumber. It was early in the morning after all, and they were fighting an even worse enemy than deadly seriousness. They were fighting dead-ass boredom.

The elves, at first themselves subject to sleepiness, soon began to split at the ears with mirth. Row after row of supplicants succumbed to the inevitable. It went the same for each – first the eyes would flutter shut, only to bolt open again, the body, slipping back, suddenly straight again. Then gradually, heads would loll forward, perhaps to rest on arms or even, in one case, to curl up in a ball on the bench. The sounds of yawns threatened to overwhelm the speaker's voice, and young children fidgeted and wrestled beneath the benches or at the back of the hall, oblivious to the whole performance.

“What a charade!” hissed Wilda, “who are these black-clad buffoons fooling? This lot couldn't give a stuff, look at them!” Listaelf, desperately struggling to resist unleashing gashing gales of laughter, could make no response. He rolled back and forth on the ground, battering the floor with his fist.

“No wonder they are trying to steal our gods and rituals: theirs are so boring and pointless! Why are these people putting up with it?” she wondered, amazed that the black robes hadn't long ago been relegated to the status of village idiots.

The priest finished incanting. Knuckles whitening as he grasped the lectern, his face puffed red. A vein throbbed violently in his neck and his eyes bulged.

“Dear God give us all mercy or we will BURN IN HELL FOR ALL ETERNITY!” now he savaged the audience in their native tongue.

“You are all sinners, damned for the crimes of Adam and Eve in the Grove at Eden! You are all dirty, disgusting, despicable hunks of skin and bone, thinking sinful thoughts and doing sinful deeds! AWGH! How you revolt me and God and Our Lord Jesus Christ!” A muffled '*Amen*' came from the priest's acolytes.

“Your only hope is to repent your wicked ways, and work for your kindly king, and hold your tongues. Never indulge in behaviour that you ENJOY. For the devil, SATAN HIMSELF, that thrice-accursed WOD, that disgusting LOK, will tempt you with the slightest laughter or pleasure!

“And to those that seek the blessings of SAINT FREDESWINDA. When you make your offerings, it will be heresy if you do not cast a load of nails into the Holy Well for Our Lord Jesus Christ (*Amen*). Only then will there be an end to the disgusting heathen orgies!

“I have driven out the earthly devils and made the Grove pure and holy, and RETRIBUTION WILL FALL ON THOSE WHO FOLLOW SATANIC ELDER PATHS!”

So the priest unleashed his anger, his audience now very much awake. He revelled in the shock that his raging rant struck through the drowsy gathering. It was becoming clear to the elves that fear kept these people here. Fear. Follow the rules and forget the old gods. God loves you in spite of yourself.

These folk, confused and afraid, cut off from nature, seemed to Listaelf and Wilda to be lost and easily controlled. The elves were astounded. The ranting cleric was a despot, not a holy man. What a sad state these folk had fallen to!

Absorbed in the performance playing out before them, the elves were oblivious to malicious movement in the shadows behind them.

It was a sad story that a few of the old house gnomes, deaf and hard-hearted, did not mourn the passing of the old religion and its love for nature. Concerned only for their continued shelter, and perhaps not realising that they could keep their positions of respect with the converted farm folk without compromise, they allied themselves with the new order, nailing their hopes for survival upon the cross. They became smaller, lumpier, and cruel, and beneath the layers of scarring lay a feeling of betrayal in each of their hearts. They eased this pain by punishing elves and land spirits who remained true to elder paths.

One such lonely, angry soul laired in the eaves of the church, the cold stone giving little comfort to his great shame. He lurked in the shadows, revelling in the sorrow that poured from the place each Sunday morn. He felt a nasty glee when he spied a pair of woodland elves crouched in the recesses of the chamber.

It was a simple thing for the skilful fellow, a matter of a mind trick, to draw an acolyte or two unwittingly toward the elves. They moved with unsettled curiosity down the side of the hall, drenched alternately in shadows and light.

The acolytes searched this way and that, eyes narrow, the hairs on the backs of their necks keen. The hunch that had drawn them into the corners of the hall had no explanation, but they felt compelled. One almost stepped on Listaelf's outstretched cloak, but passed by; bewildered by the feeling that he had missed his mark.

Grumpily, the gnome turned his wily will upon the elves themselves. In his bag he held a pouch of shaved wood, taken from a rune tine carved to call the concealed into clarity. With a deft flick, he cast the chips over the elves' backs. The flecks of tree flesh bore heavily upon the elves, peeling back the powers of their cunning cloaks.

Listaelf and Wilda gazed disturbed as the priest pronounced a cup of wine to be godly gore. Then they gasped and gagged as the priest slowly raised the body of his God to his lips. The wafer was raised to the ceiling, then plunged into the cleric's maw. The elves gurgled and choked, retched when he swiftly followed with a swallowed swig of Christ's blood.

It seemed this religion's basis was the butchering and eating of blessedness.

The first acolyte spun suddenly, sweat beading on his brow, clutching his staff. He waved his companion over, whispered hoarsely in his ear. They worked back the way he had come.

The gnome glared from his hole, beady eyes betraying a touch of sadness at what he had become. He worked his will into whispered words, weaving the old ways of magic against themselves. Twisted speech boiled from his bulging tongue. The whites of his eyes guided them to the ears of the acolytes. His stony body trembled and strained.

The priest waved forth his disciples and bade all the folk join him in his flesh eating and blood drinking.

The acolytes slowed, their stalking sibilantly shadowed by spoken words of broken power. What was this noise? Their heads turned, forth and back, hunting.

The people slowly filed forth. Wilda could look no longer and covered her eyes. Listaelf choked on vomit.

The first acolyte paused, waved to his ally.

Wilda moaned: "We must flee!"

The flock began to devour God.

Priestly ears pricked up.

Sudden movement. Black cloth flashing. Limbs spinning. A shout. A wet thud. Hard boots on ribs. Brutal cursing.

Retching and choking, the elves no match for the acolyte-thugs.

A slight pause in the holy proceedings, but not the first time this had happened. The flock, thinking some fool had said the wrong thing again, wait in line like pigs.

The gnome wants to cry. To his dismay he finds he no longer can.

Chapter Five

The dark robes had been marching for hours when Listaelf and Wilda awoke. Each hung from a staff slung between two bearers, wrists and ankles burning where hemp bound them to the bole. Their captors moved grimly, guarded by a pack of mail-clad warriors. The elves were bruised, blurry, bleeding, their bodies badly beaten.

Listaelf found alertness first, disoriented by the haze of mid-morn, not his last recollected dawn. His mind was scattered, his flesh languid, and some deep spark of his spirit sensed that he had been drugged. He struggled to form his thoughts into shapes, but the effort was too great. So he hung in the spell of drug and despair for some unknowable time.

Wilda had suffered more from their captor's violence, and came to consciousness later. The elves' slitted eyes betrayed wakefulness to each other, but their captors continued unawares. Slowly, matters became manifest – this was the path to the Grove. The black robed high priest must have guessed their origin. As she gradually gained more sense, Wilda came to see something dreadful: their captors were laden with pitch, torches, oil, and axes. They were going to burn the Grove. The elves could do naught but hang helplessly.

As the sun reached the peak of her flight from the wolf, the ill party came to a halt at the rim of the Grove. The path lay paved with burnished red leaves, cast in sorrow from naked trees. The sky a haze of mourning cold, the air no more

with summer glow. The band of black-clad men and their martial companions settled down to a hasty meal of cold meat, then turned to ready their weapons against the wood. The head priest and his followers formed a tight knot before the entrance to the Grove.

All lay at peace in the shadows of the trees, their graceful limbs arcing to the sky. The giant boles were deep and wide, but the path was clear and easily picked out.

“First”, declared the leader, “we destroy the well. Then, we burn the whole Grove down, and come back for these devils,” he pointed at the elves. “We'll throw them onto the pyre. This place is too great a hold of Satan to let it persist.”

With these words the air changed, subtle and menacing. As the invaders marched in, the trees sighed in the wind, letting their last leaves float to the earth below. The sky, a brooding mess of autumn noon-tide grey and blue. Faint whispers flowed along the gracious limbs of the trees, their fingers coiled in newfound tension, the sky's weight for once too much. Their roots, wilful yet weary, drove deep into the ground, conspiring with the earth. The invaders faintly felt the trees' many heartbeats amid the boles' sibilant whispers. They armoured their hearts and drowned their fears.

Listaelf and Wilda watched the column stalk into the Grove, relieved that their captors were gone. They turned their attention to freedom. A simple trick for elvish wits: they laid calls to local beasts, a small flock of field mice tore into the twine, unbound their bonds. They achingly aided each other to stand, rubbed their sore limbs and bruised ribs. The Sun passed behind a heavier layer of cloud, and the Grove clenched into longer shadows. The clouds, having settled, moved no further. Limping and groaning, the elves followed the invaders' footsteps into the shelter of the bare canopy.

Father Dreogan, the head priest, stood before his followers, unlit brand tightly grasped. He stared up at the arching branches as the shadows lengthened. The natural noises of the place had died down – no song of bird or rustling of squirrel to be heard. He knew the silence to be Satanic.

Father Dreogan lived in fear of places such as this, that refused God's graces. That remained mysterious even after exorcism. The stink of nature, tempting the flock with innumerable sins. He could not bear it in the face of his Lord, least of all his own passions, discharged in secret shame. Deeply he held his holy conviction: by destroying such dens of darkness, he could atone for himself.

Every branch, every knotted stretch of bark, every root barrelling into the ground seemed to mock his suffering. He clung to God like a drowning man, clung to God's clarity. He would bathe this wretched hold and all like it in the unrelenting light of Christ. Destroy such dens, and pound his pain down deeper by the same movement.

How you long to shed tears, he imagined the trees whispering to him. He shook his head, overriding their presence. He quickened the march and the dark branches crowded closer around the band.

Listaelf and Wilda sighed with relief when they felt the bark of their wards. Wearily they clambered into the boughs, gingerly wended their way through the canopy. Normally they could move through the trees faster than any human could march along the ground. But wounded now, their passage was sluggish.

The invaders slowed as they neared the well. The ancient presence that pervaded the Grove unsettled their blood and bones, recalling in them the broken grasp of nature's hold. Their expressions sharpened now, as the elves moved painstakingly above them from branch to branch, a building charge of danger spiralling in their veins. Listaelf and Wilda felt what the trees felt – these men were here to visit their fear and self-hatred upon the well and the Grove. The elves reached their perch above the water and sifted through their stash of curved yew and twisted twine, biting barbs and fleet feathers.

Father Dreogan was sure he sensed movement in the edges of his vision. He turned slowly, masking his rising fear, to his men. Hastily they tried to hide their nerves from him.

He remembered his childhood, playing among trees, dancing about roots and bouncing upon branches with children his age. The trees about him recalled that secret communion between child and earth. He thought about days past when laughter rang from his lips. It was a time when he had been at home in the wild, comforted by the wind, the leaves whispering their affection.

But these were innocent lies, he reminded himself. His Christian faith smote his memory with a burning brand. It ripped the roots of his love of nature and buried it deep. He suppressed a tear. Eyes bulging, his new truth reclaimed its throne.

“Remember,” he said, voice cracking, “all power comes from the Almighty. There is no magic that is not God's and no spirit that is not the Holy Ghost.” His wavering speech trailed off. The band faltered forward, still mindful of faint whispers and hidden mysteries among branches and boughs. The path opened,

and they came to the well.

Chapter Six

The wind rose. Above the branches, clouds boiled. Blood-coloured leaves lashed through the air in wicked circuits. The invaders slowed in the face of the buffeting gusts; only Father Dreogan had the courage to advance towards the clearing.

Listaelf and Wilda raised their bows, unleashed a storm of elfshot. Outcry, chaos, soldiers collapsing, vomiting, struck with violent illness from invisible barbs. Those uninjured returned fire at their shadowy assailants. Wilda slipped, fell from her perch, Listaelf's grip lunging, catching her wrist. He dangled, an arrow lodged in one leg, teeth grit. Wilda slid further, dragging Listaelf with her. Then his hold caught and he hung from a branch, clutching Wilda above a dreadful drop. Tears coursed down her cheeks as she struggled to latch onto the foliage.

The soldiers glared warily at the trees as the acolytes tended to their wounded comrades. They had begun to vomit blood: elven vengeance was swift.

The wind whipped into icy passion as Father Dreogan marched towards the well, grasping a flask of poison. The acolytes could do nothing for the elves' wretched victims, who lay in the dirt, gasping. They turned to light torches, retreated to the trees to hide from the wind. The soldiers splashed pitch and oil upon the nearest oaks with abandon. The winds whipped higher, and the invaders' panic rose. Out in the distance, they imagined tree branches bending under the force of more than just the wind's weight. The leaves, fiery and harsh in the air's embrace, scowled threateningly.

Wilda tried to swing in Listaelf's grasp, the wind buffeting her. She could hear his shouts, but the air snatched his words away. The branch she sought, so near, swept clear of her grasp again and again. Listaelf slipped, his arms burning, head swimming from his wound. So close to safety, then the branch would fling clear, Wilda trapped in empty air. She could feel Listaelf's fingers weakening around her leg. The drop to the ground dizzied her. Autumn's leaves cut the air aggressively, and the earth beneath was naked and rough.

Father Dreogan, seething and bowed, reached the still water of the well. He kicked past the remains of offerings, fruit flying clear. At the well's rim he rose, despite the wind, to full height, the flask above his head.

“In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost!” he screamed, eyes wild. He steadied himself, braced against the gusts buffeting his body. He felt something shift beneath his feet, something huge, old, hard. He shot his glance to one side, the oak he saw seeming to smirk. He spat: the phlegm flew back into his face.

With no warning the wind disappeared. Father Dreogan stepped forward, a rotten apple squelching beneath his foot. Then blasts of air struck with full fury, spearing into his back. He looked down in dismay, seeing the apple for the first time. As he pitched forward its soft flesh slid, spinning him into free fall. The oak's crags were angular and aggressive, majestic and ethereal.

Dreogan wondered absently as he fell: how could something so beautiful seem to him so malignant?

Crash. The water rose up around the fallen priest, wind snatching the poison vessel clear of the well. A few moments of thrashing, the black robes desperate. Then nothing.

The wind hurtled to a halt. Dismayed, the acolytes and soldiers gathered around the well. Leaves fluttered to the earth. Trees held themselves in silence. Wilda latched to the branch, swung clear, clung for life; Listaelf sighed with relief and hung to his perch now with both hands, wound aching.

The men stared. Their leader was gone. The water of the well was absolutely still. Dark and silent it lay, expectantly. The men looked at each other. They looked around. The Grove was silent. Sunlight pierced the skeletal canopy.

They fled.

Chapter Seven.

Winter brought white death upon the land. Little was said of the priest's fate, but with spring's rise, a new one came. He had heard rumours. He turned a complacent eye to the comfort some folk found in old beliefs.

Listaelf and Wilda suffered through winter's cruelty, wary lest the black robes return. In time, their injuries healed. With spring, they danced and laughed. They came to travel, seeking other holy places, and their apples brought cheer to many a lonely elf.

As the years bore by, some folk offered to Frea; some to St Fredeswinda; some

to Freawinde; some to St Frea. Eventually it ceased to matter. Memory faded, reformed, folk forgot why they offered apples and ribbons to the well at Frewella Grove. Their children flourished and their sick mended. So goes the earth-faith of folk.