

Wildwood Dancing (Wildwood Dancing Series Book 1)

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To my granddaughter Claire

Many people assisted in the preparation of this book. Mircea Gastaldo took me to parts of Transylvania I never could have reached on my own, and shared his wealth of knowledge and his love of Romanian culture and landscape. My son Godric was a stalwart minder and assistant on that trip. Elly, Bronya, Ben, and Rain read the manuscript in various forms and provided invaluable feedback and creative input. Fiona Leonard, Tom Edwards, and Satima Flavell helped with brainstorming and critiquing as the book progressed, and kept me sane during some difficult times. My thanks to Michelle Frey, whose perceptive editorial input helped shape the book into its final form, and to Brianne Tunnicliffe, Anna McFarlane, and Stefanie Bierwerth, who worked on the Australian and UK editions. Last but not least, heartfelt thanks to my agent, Russell Galen, for his ongoing support and enthusiasm, and to Danny Baror for his efficient work on foreign rights.

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Wildwood Dancing will take you to another time and indeed another world. For proper pronunciation of names and for details about select Romanian terms, please turn to the back of the book.

I've heard it said that girls can't keep secrets. That's wrong: we'd proved it. We'd kept ours for years and years, ever since we came to live at Piscul Dracului and stumbled on the way into the Other Kingdom. Nobody knew about it—not Father, not our housekeeper, Florica, or her husband, Petru, not Uncle Nicolae or Aunt Bogdana or their son, Cezar. We found the portal when Tati was seven and I was six, and we'd been going out and coming in nearly every month since then: nine whole years of Full Moons. We had plenty of ways to cover our absences, including a bolt on our bedchamber door and the excuse that my sister Paula sometimes walked in her sleep.

I suppose the secret was not completely ours; Gogu knew. But even if frogs could talk, Gogu would never have told. Ever since I'd found him long ago, crouched all by himself in the forest, dazed and hurt, I had known I could trust him more than anyone else in the world.

It was the day of Full Moon. In the bedchamber our gowns and shoes were laid out ready; combs, bags, and hair ornaments were set beside them. Nothing would be touched now, until the household was safely in bed. Fortunately, it was rare for Florica to come up to our room, because it was at the top of a flight of stairs, and stairs made her knees hurt. I did wonder how much Florica knew or guessed. She must have noticed how quiet we always were on the night of Full Moon, and how exhausted we were when we stumbled down to breakfast the next morning. But if she knew, Florica didn't say a thing.

During the day we kept up our normal activities, trying not to arouse suspicion. Paula helped Florica cook fish *ciorbă*, while Iulia went out to lend a hand to Petru, who was storing away sacks of grain to last us over the winter. Iulia did not enjoy the hard work of the farm, but at least, she said, it made the time go more quickly. Tati was teaching Stela to read: I had seen the two of them ensconced in a warm corner of the kitchen, making letters in a tray of wet sand.

I sat in the workroom with Father, reconciling a set of orders with a record of payments. I was good with figures and helped him regularly with such tasks. The merchant business in which he was a partner with his cousin, whom we called Uncle Nicolae, kept the two of them much occupied. Gogu sat on the desk, keeping himself to himself, though once or twice I caught his silent voice—the one only I could hear.

You're upset, Jena.

"Mmm," I murmured, not wanting to get into a real conversation with him while both Father and

his secretary, Gabriel, were in the room. My family didn't truly believe that I sometimes knew what Gogu was thinking. Even my sisters, who had long ago accepted that this was no ordinary frog, thought that I was deluding myself—putting my own words into the frog's mouth, perhaps. I knew that was wrong. I'd had Gogu since I was a small girl, and the things he told me definitely didn't come from my own head.

Don't be sad. Tonight is Full Moon.

"I can't help it, Gogu. I'm worried. Now hush, or Father will hear me."

Father was trying to write a letter. He kept coughing, and in between bouts he struggled to catch his breath. Tomorrow he would be leaving on a journey to the port of Constanța, in the milder climate of the Black Sea coast. His doctor had told him, sternly, that if he tried to get through another winter at Piscul Dracului in his present ill health, he would be dead before the first buds opened on the oaks. We five sisters would be looking after the place on our own, right through the winter. Of course, Uncle Nicolae would help with the business, and Florica and Petru with the house and farm. It was not so much the extra responsibility that troubled me. Father was away often enough on business and we had coped before, though not for so long. What chilled me was the thought that when we said goodbye in the morning, it might be forever.

At supper we were all quiet. I was thinking about what Father had confided to Tati and me earlier. Up till then, none of us had mentioned the possibility that Father might die of this illness, for to say that aloud would be to put the unthinkable into words. But Father had wanted his eldest daughters to be prepared for whatever might happen. Should he die before any of us girls married and bore a son, he'd explained, both Piscul Dracului and Father's share of the business would go to Uncle Nicolae, as the closest male relative. We were not to worry. If the worst should occur, Uncle Nicolae would see we were provided for.

Uncle Nicolae's family home was called Vărfu cu Negură: Storm Heights. His house was quite grand, set on a hillside and surrounded by birch and pine forest. He ran a prosperous farm and a timber business, as well as the trading ventures that had made him wealthy. When we were little, we had lived in the merchant town of Brașov, and Vărfu cu Negură had been a place we visited as a special treat. It was hard to say what I had loved best about it: the dark forest, the forbidden lake, or the excitement of playing with our big cousins, who were both boys.

But there was no doubt at all what Father had loved. Next door to Vărfu cu Negură was Piscul Dracului, Devil's Peak. Father had first seen the empty, crumbling castle, set on a high spur of rock, when he was only a boy. Our father was an unusual kind of person, and as soon as he clapped eyes on Piscul Dracului he wanted to live there. There'd been nobody to inherit the ruin and the tract of wildwood that went with it; perhaps the many strange tales attached to the place had frightened people away. The owner had died long ago. Florica and Petru had been custodians of the place for years, looking after the empty chambers and eking out a living from the small farm, for they were hardworking, thrifty folk.

Father had waited a long time to achieve his dream. He had worked hard, married, and fathered daughters, bought and sold, scrimped and saved. When he'd set enough silver aside from his merchant ventures, trading in silk carpets and bear skins, spices and fine porcelain, he'd quietly paid a large sum to an influential *voivode*, gone into partnership with Uncle Nicolae, and moved our family into Piscul Dracului.

I think Mother would have preferred to stay in Brașov, for she feared the tales folk told about the old castle. It looked as if it had grown up out of the forest, with an assortment of bits and pieces sprouting from every corner: tiny turrets, long covered walkways, squat round towers, arches, and

flagpoles. The eccentric nobleman who had built it had probably been someone just like Father. People seldom ventured into the forest around Piscul Dracului. There was a lake deep within the wildwood, a place unofficially known as the Deadwash, though its real name was prettier: Tăul Ieelor, Lake of the Nymphs. Every family had a dark story about the Deadwash. We got ours soon after we moved into the castle. When I was five years old, my cousin Costi—Uncle Nicolae's eldest son—drowned in Tăul Ieelor. I was there when it happened. The things folk said about the lake were true.

Before Father became so ill, Tati and I had scarcely given a thought to such weighty matters as what might happen to Piscul Dracului, with no son to inherit our father's property. My elder sister was a dreamer, and I had a different kind of future in mind for myself: one in which I would work alongside my father, traveling and trading and seeing the world. Marriage and children were secondary in my scheme of things. Now—with Father's cough ringing in our ears, and his white face regarding us across the supper table—they had become a frightening reality. I remembered Aunt Bogdana saying that sixteen was the ideal age for a young woman to wed. Tati was already in her seventeenth year; I was only one year younger.

Father went off to bed as soon as the meal was over; he'd hardly touched his food. The others disappeared to our bedchamber, but I waited for Florica to bank up the fire in the big stove and for Petru to bolt the front door, and for the two of them to retire to their sleeping quarters. Then it was safe, and I ran up the stairs to our chamber, my worries set aside for now, my heart beating fast with an anticipation that was part joy, part fear. At last it was time.

The long room we sisters shared had four round windows of colored glass: soft violet, blood-red, midnight-blue, beech-green. Beyond them the full moon was sailing up into the night sky. I put Gogu on a shelf to watch as I took off my working dress and put on my dancing gown, a green one that my frog was particularly fond of. Paula was calmly lighting our small lanterns, to be ready for the journey.

With five girls, even the biggest bedchamber can get crowded. As Tati fastened the hooks on my gown, I watched Iulia twirling in front of the mirror. She was thirteen now, and developing the kind of curvaceous figure our mother had had. Her gown was of cobalt silk and she had swept her dark curls up into a circlet of ribbon butterflies. We had become clever, over the years, in our use of the leftovers from Father's shipments. He was good at what he did, but buying Piscul Dracului had eaten up a lot of his funds and, even in partnership with his wealthy cousin, he was still making up for lost ground. I saw the books every day—he had been unable to conceal from me that finances remained very tight. We sisters had to improvise. We made one new dancing gown anytime a cargo contained a little more of a certain fabric than the buyer had requested. I wore Tati's hand-me-downs; Paula wore mine. Iulia, with her fuller figure, did rather better, because she could not fit into either Tati's clothes or mine. All the same, she complained; she would have liked a whole wardrobe of finery. Tati was clever with her needle, and adjusted old things of Mother's to fit her. Mother was gone. We had lost her when our youngest sister was born. Stela was only five—easy to dress.

Paula had finished lighting the lamps. Now she crouched to bank up the fire in our little stove and ensure its door was safely shut. One year Iulia's junior, Paula was our scholar. While I was good at figures, she shone in all branches of learning. Our village priest, Father Sandu, came up to Piscul Dracului once a month to provide Paula with private tutoring—I shared in the mathematical part of these lessons—and went home with a bottle of Petru's finest țuică in his coat pocket. Most folk believed education of that kind was wasted on girls. But Father had never cared what people thought. *Follow your heart* was one of his favorite sayings.

"What is it, Jena?" Paula had noticed me staring at her. The heat from the stove had flushed her

cheeks pink. Her dark eyes were fixed on me with an assessing look. Tonight she was wearing dove-gray, with her spectacles on a chain around her neck, and her brown curls disciplined into a neat plait.

"You look pretty tonight," I said. "So do you, Stela." Stela, our baby, was rosy-cheeked and small, like a little bird, maybe a robin. Her hair, the same ebony as Tati's, was wispy and soft, and tonight it was tied back with rose-pink ribbons to match the gown Tati had made for her. She was standing by the oak chest, jiggling up and down in excitement.

"What about your hair, Jena?" asked Tati, doing up my last hook. "It's all over the place."

"Never mind," I told her, knowing nobody would be looking at me while she was anywhere near. My elder sister's gown was a simple one of violet-blue that matched her eyes. Her hair rippled down her back like black silk. Tati didn't need jewelry or ribbons or any sort of finery. She was as lovely as a perfect wildflower. It always seemed to me a generous fairy must have presided over her christening, for Tati was blessed with the kind of beauty that draws folk's eyes and opens their minds to dreams.

I didn't make a big effort with my appearance. When people commented on our family of sisters, Tati was always the beautiful one. If they noticed me at all, they called me sensible or practical. I had bushy hair, brown like Paula's, which refused to do what I wanted it to, and eyes of a color somewhere between mud and leaf. My figure was a lot more straight-up-and-down than Iulia's, even though I was two years her elder. The one special thing about my green gown was the pocket I had sewn into it for Gogu, since he needed a safe retreat if he got tired or upset. Tonight the only ornament I carried was the frog himself, sitting on my shoulder. *You look lovely, Jena. Like a forest pool on a summer's day.*

Tati darted across to make sure our door was bolted. Then, by the shifting light of the lanterns, we moved to the most shadowy corner of the chamber: the place where we had once sat playing games by candlelight and made the most astonishing discovery of our lives.

We dragged out the heavy oak chest from against the wall and set our lanterns on it so their light was cast into the little alcove where the chest had been, an indentation that wasn't even big enough to store a folded blanket in.

"Come on," Iulia urged. "My feet are itching for a dance."

The first time we had done this, in our earliest days at Piscul Dracului—when I was only six, and Stela was not yet born—Tati and I had been amusing the younger ones by making shadow creatures on the wall: rabbits, dogs, bats. At the moment when all our hands had been raised at once to throw a particular image on the stones, we had found our forest's hidden world. Whether it had been chance or a gift, we had never been sure.

It made no difference that we had done this over and over. The sense of thrilling strangeness had never gone away. Every Full Moon, our bodies tingled with the magic of it. The lamp shone on the blank wall. One by one, we stretched out our hands, and the lantern light threw the silhouettes onto the stones. One by one, we spoke our names in a breathless whisper:

"Tatiana."

"Jenica."

"Iulia."

"Paula."

"Stela."

Between the shadows of our outstretched fingers, a five-pointed star appeared. The portal opened. Instead of a shallow alcove, there was a little archway and a flight of stone steps snaking down, down into the depths of the castle. It was dark, shadow-dark.... The first time it ever happened, back when there were only four of us, we had clutched one another's hands tightly and crept down, trembling with excitement and terror. For the others the fear had dissipated over the years; I could see no trace of misgiving in any of them now, only shining eyes and eager faces.

I was different. The magic drew me despite myself; I passed through the portal because it seemed to me I must. There were eldritch forces all around, and the only thing sure was that the powers of the wildwood were unpredictable. It was curious: from the first I had felt that without me, my sisters would not be safe in the Other Kingdom.

Lanterns in hand, we made our way down the winding stairway, holding up our long skirts as our shadows danced beside us on the ancient stone walls. It was so deep, it was like going to the bottom of a well. Gogu rode on my shoulder down the twists and turns of the stair, until we came to the long, arched passage at the bottom.

"Hurry up!" urged Iulia, who was at the front of the line.

Our slippers whispered on the stone floor as we glided along under the carved extravagance of the roof. Here, there were enough gargoyles and dragons and strange beasts to decorate the grandest building in all Transylvania. They clung to the corners and crept around the pillars and dripped from the arches, watching us with bright, unwavering eyes. Subterranean mosses crawled over their heads and shoulders, softening their angular forms with little capes of green and gray and brown. The first time we saw this Gallery of Beasts, Tati had whispered, "They're not real, are they?" and I had whispered back, "Just nod your head to them, and keep on walking." I had sensed, even then, that respect and courtesy could go a long way to keeping a person safe in a place such as this.

As we passed now, I felt something jump onto my shoulder—the one not occupied by Gogu—and cling there, its needle claws pricking my skin through the soft fabric of the green gown. It was doing its best to look like a frog, rolling up its long tail and bulging its eyes, while casting surreptitious glances at Gogu.

The frog tensed. *Interloper.*

The little creature poked out a forked tongue, hissing.

"Lights out!" ordered Iulia, and we each covered our lanterns in turn. As our eyes adjusted to the sudden darkness, a pale expanse came into view ahead of us: the mist-wreathed waters of a broad lake, illuminated by the moon. Through the vaporous cloud we could see the bobbing torches of those who were waiting to escort us on the last part of our journey.

"Ooo-oo!" Iulia called in a falling cadence. "Ooo-oo!"

The little boats came, one by one, out of the tendrils of mist—high-prowed and graceful, each shaped in the form of a creature: swan, wyvern, phoenix, wood duck, and salamander. In each stood a figure, propelling the craft by means of a slender pole: push and lift, push and lift. The response to Iulia's call came in five voices, each different, each as uncanny as the others. Our

guides were what they were; the only human creatures in this midnight realm were ourselves.

The boats pulled in to the shore. The boatmen stepped out to help us board. The next part, my frog didn't like. He began to quiver in fright, a rapid trembling that went right through his body. I was used to this; he did it every time. I held him against my breast and, as I climbed into the boat, I murmured, "It's all right, Gogu, I've got you. We'll be there soon."

Tăul Ielelor: the Deadwash. This was the place where Costi had drowned. Our mother had warned us about it, over and over: we should never go there, for to do so was to risk harm at the hands of the vengeful fairy folk who had robbed us of our cousin. And yet, since the very first time the portal had opened for us, the realm that lay beyond had shown us warmth and kindness, open arms, and welcoming smiles. I was still cautious; I did not have it in me to trust unconditionally. All the same, it was impossible to believe that the person who had drowned our cousin was one of those greeting us on our nocturnal journeys.

The folk of the Other Kingdom had their own name for this expanse of shining water—at Full Moon, they called it the Bright Between. The lake waters spanned the distance between their world and ours. Once we set foot in their boats, we were caught in the magic of their realm.

Time and distance were not what they seemed in the Other Kingdom. It was a long walk from Piscul Dracului to the Deadwash in our world—an expedition. Gogu and I had made that forbidden trip often, for the lake drew us despite ourselves. At Full Moon, the walk to Tăul Ielelor was far shorter. At Full Moon, everything was different, everything was upside down and back to front. Doors opened that were closed on other days, and those whom the human world feared became friends. The Bright Between was a gateway: not a threat, but a promise.

It was all too easy to lose track of time in the Other Kingdom—to forget where you were and where you had come from. This might be the familiar forest, the same one in which Petru farmed our smallholding, and Uncle Nicolae harvested pines to sell for timber, and Cousin Cezar went out hunting in autumn. It was the same and not the same. When we crossed the Bright Between, we entered a realm that existed at the same time and place as ours, with the same trees and hillsides and rocks. But it was not open to humankind, except for those lucky few who found a portal and its key. And the folk who lived there lived by their own laws, laws not at all like those of the human world. Any aged man or woman with stories to tell knew that. There were tales about men who'd gone through a portal and spent a night among the forest folk, and when they'd come back again, a hundred years had passed, and their wives and children were dead and buried. There were stories about people who had visited the fairy revels and been driven right out of their minds. When they returned to the human world, all they did was wander around the forest in a daze, until they perished from cold or hunger or thirst. There were still more accounts of folk who had gone into the forest and simply disappeared.

So, although we believed such misfortunes would never befall *us*—for we were constantly assured by the folk of the Other Kingdom that they loved and welcomed us—we had made a set of rules to keep us safe. If anything went wrong, the others were to come to Tati or me immediately: they were to do as we told them, without question. There was no eating or drinking while we were in the Other Kingdom, except sips from the water bottle one of us always brought from home. There was no leaving the glade where the dancing took place, however tempted we might be to wander off down beguiling pathways into the moonlit forest. We must keep an eye on one another, keep one another safe. And when Tati or I said it was time to go home, everyone must go without argument. Those rules had protected us through nine years of Full Moons. They had become second nature.

The boats swept across the Bright Between. As we passed a certain point, the air filled with a

sweet, whispering music. Swarms of small bright creatures that were not quite birds or insects or fairy folk swooped and rose, hovered and dived around us, making a living banner to salute our arrival. Underwater beings swam beside our craft, creatures with large, luminous eyes, long hands, froned tails, and glowing green-blue skin. Many dwelled in or on Tăul Ielelor: ragged swimmers resembling weedy plants, their gaze turned always up, up to the surface; the beguiling pale figures of the *Iele*, from whom the lake got its name, reaching out graceful white arms from bank or islet or overhanging willow. Should an unwary man from our world be passing, they would seek to entice him from his path forever. As we neared the opposite shore, an assortment of tiny folk rowed out from the miniature islands to join us, in a bobbing flotilla of boats made from nutshells and dried leaves and the discarded carapaces of beetles. We reached the far shore, and my escort—who was three feet high and almost as wide, with a scarlet beard down to his boot tops—handed me out. He made a low bow.

“Thank you,” I said as the gargoyle made a flying leap from my shoulder, then scampered off into the undergrowth.

“Delighted to be of service, Mistress Jenica. I’ll expect you to return the favor, mind.”

“You shall have the first dance, of course, Master Anatolie,” I told him.

The dwarf grinned, revealing a set of jeweled studs in his front teeth. “I’ll match you step for step, young lady. You’ll find me a more satisfactory partner than that slippery green friend of yours. He’s shaking like a jelly—wouldn’t know a jig if it jumped up and bit him.”

Gogu stopped shivering instantly. I could feel bunched-up irritation in every part of him.

“You’ve upset him,” I said. “Frogs have feelings, too, you know.”

The dwarf bowed again. “No offense,” he said, his eyes on Gogu. “It should be an interesting night. We’ve got visitors. Night People from the forests of the east.”

A bolt of horror shot through me and I stopped walking. Ahead of us, my sisters and their assorted escorts were disappearing along the broad, leaf-carpeted track that led away under tall trees, following the sweet call of a flute. The branches were festooned with colored lights shaped like birds and beetles and flowers. “Night People?” I echoed, and heard the tremor in my voice. Fragments of dark stories crept into my mind: tales of blood and violence, of evil deeds and terrible retribution.

“Nothing to worry about,” said Anatolie offhand.

“Yes, it is!” I protested. “Florica, who works for us, says they come at night and bite people in their beds. She says the only thing they drink is human blood.” My sisters were too far ahead to be called back.

“This would be the same Florica who said all dwarves were liars and thieves?” Anatolie asked, feet planted apart and hands on hips. His cloak was ankle length and lined with what appeared to be bear skin.

“Well, yes,” I said.

“The same Florica who told you not to go too close to the Deadwash or you’d be scooped up in the magic fishing net of Drăguța, the witch of the wood?”

“Yes, but ... but Night People, everyone says—” I stopped myself. Anatolie was right. If I had never met one, it was unfair to judge on the basis of stories.

“You and your sisters are quite safe here,” the dwarf said as we started walking again. “Hasn’t the forest queen herself allowed you to visit her revels these nine years of Full Moons? Believe me, if her protection did not stretch out over the five of you, you would not be here now.”

“I don’t like the sound of that at all,” I said, wondering whether he meant we would have met the same fate as the foolish folk in the stories: dead, mad, or vanished.

“The Night People will not touch you while Ileana is queen of the wildwood,” Anatolie said. “You have my word.”

“Thank you,” I said, but I was full of doubt. I could not remember hearing a single good thing about the Night People, and I had no wish to meet even one of them. They’d never been to Dancing Glade before; at least, not when we were there. I thought about garlic, and silver crosses, and everything else folk used to keep such dangerous forces at bay. I hadn’t brought a thing to protect myself or my sisters.

When we reached the glade, the festivities were in full swing. A circle of autumn-clad trees sheltered the grassy sward, their branches hung with still more lanterns. These cast a warm light over the brightly clad revelers, whose gowns and masks, robes and jewels filled the open space with a swirling mass of color. Above them, creatures performed aerial dances of their own, some borne on delicate, diaphanous wings, some on leathery, creaking membranes. Some of the guests were tall enough to bump their heads on the lanterns; some were so tiny, one had to take care not to step on them. I saw my gargoyle perched on the branch of a holly bush, waving its paws in time with the music and beaming beatifically.

The musicians sat on a raised platform at the far end, under the biggest oak. The instruments were the same as the ones in the village band—flute, drum, goat-pipes, fiddle—and yet they were not quite the same. Each possessed a strangeness that set it apart. What ordinary drum cries out poetry when beaten? What flute plays three tunes at once, each blending perfectly with the others? As for the goat-pipes, they had something of the voice of the creature whose skin had provided their air bag, plaintive and piercing. The fiddle soared like a lark.

The sound of this band was intoxicating to the ears, the kind of felicitous blend a village musician aspires to and may achieve once in a lifetime. It made feet move faster, pulses race, faces flush. It set hearts thumping and coaxed smiles from the most somber mouths. It was a music we would keep on hearing in our dreams, days after Full Moon was over and we were gone from the Other Kingdom.

Iulia was already out there, dark hair flying, her face wreathed in smiles. Tati danced more sedately, her hand in that of tall Grigori, an imposing figure with long, twisted dark hair. It was said he was a kinsman of Drăguța, the witch of the wood.

Paula was not dancing, but had gone straight to her usual group of friends, a clutch of witches, astronomers, and soothsayers clad in long, raggedy robes and swathing, vaporous cloaks. All wore hats—I saw tall pointed structures decorated with stars, and scholarly felt caps, and here and there a mysterious shadowy hood. They were gathered around a table under the trees, deep in debate as always, their arguments fueled by a continuous supply of țuică. Paula was seated among them, waving her hands about as she expounded some theory.

Stela was with the smallest folk, down near the musicians. There was a double ring of them,

weaving in and out and around about in a dance of their own. Some had wings, some horns, some feathers, and some shining, jewel-bright scales. They were chattering like a mob of little birds as they pranced to and fro, and still managing to get every step perfect. We'd all started here; as we grew older, we had been welcomed by different folk, collected by different ferrymen, and permitted to mix more widely. Dancing Glade had its own set of rules.

"Hello, Jena!" my little sister called, waving wildly. Then she plunged back into the circle.

The pattern of the night was always the same. The revels would begin with chain dances, circle dances, devised so everyone could join in, the big and small, the clumsy and dainty, side by side. We sisters had been part of this since the first time we came across to the Other Kingdom, when kindly folk of all shapes used to take our small hands and guide us through the steps. We needed no guidance now, for we were skilled in all the dances. The first was always done with our boatmen by our sides—it was their privilege to lead us onto the sward. At some point in the evening the queen of the forest would hold formal court; this was the opportunity for newcomers to be greeted, petitions made, questions asked. Later on, the music would change, and with it the mood of the crowd. That was the time for couples to dance slow measures in each other's arms, floating in their own small worlds. By then my youngest sisters would be getting tired, and we would all sit under the trees and watch until it was time for the last dance—a grand gathering of the entire crowd, in celebration of Full Moon. Then we would pass across the Bright Between once more, and go home to another month of hard work and dreaming.

The music was making my feet move even before I trod on the sward. I took the dwarf's hand and we threw ourselves into a jig. The drumbeat made my heart race; the goat-pipes seemed to speak to something deep inside me, saying, *Faster, faster! You're alive!* Anatolie gripped my hand tightly as we ran and jumped, as we turned, and swayed, and pointed our toes. Gogu had retreated to the pocket, where he was safe from falling and being trampled by the multitude of stamping, hopping, kicking feet. When the dance was over, I fished him out and set him on my shoulder once more.

"All right?" I whispered.

If you could call being shaken about like a feather duster "all right," I suppose so.

I was looking around the glade as my heartbeat slowly returned to normal. "Where are the Night People?" I asked Anatolie.

"They will come. Wait until the moon moves higher; wait until you see her between the branches of the tallest oaks. Then you'll catch a glimpse of them, around the edges."

"Don't they dance?"

Anatolie grinned. "I'll bet you a silver piece to a lump of coal that you can't get one of them to step up and partner you," he said. "They stick to their own kind, those black-cloaked streaks of melancholy. They don't come to enjoy themselves, but to observe—to take stock."

Out of long habit, because I was the sensible sister, I checked on the others, one by one, to make sure they were safe. Over at the far side of the sward I saw Stela, now playing a chasing game with her bevy of small companions. Those that could fly had a distinct advantage. Iulia was with a circle of young forest men and women. When I had first seen such folk, I had thought of them as fairies—though they were far taller and more elegant than the tiny figures of my childhood imagination—with their garments constructed of leaves and cobwebs, vines, bark, and feathers, and their features unsettlingly not quite human. There was no sign of Paula, but she would still be at the scholars' table.

There was a ripple of movement. A fanfare rang out and the crowd parted before an imposing figure clad in a gown that seemed fashioned of iridescent gossamer. It was Ileana, the hostess of these celebrations and queen of the forest people, sweeping across Dancing Glade. Folk said every bird of the wildwood had given one feather to make up her crown, which rose from her head in an exuberant crest. Her golden-haired consort, Marin, was a step behind her. This grand entrance was a feature of every Full Moon's revels. Walking behind the queen and her partner tonight was a group of folk I had never seen before.

"That's them," Anatolie hissed. "Sour-faced individuals, aren't they?"

I did not think the Night People were sour-faced, just rather sad-looking. They were extremely pale, their skin almost waxen in appearance, their eyes deep set, dark, and intense. All were clad in jet-black. The pair who led them was especially striking. The woman's lips were narrow and bright crimson in color, whether by nature or artifice I could not tell. Her fingernails had been dyed to match. Both she and the man had bony, aristocratic features: well-defined cheeks and jaws; jutting, arrogant noses; and dark, winged brows. They made a handsome couple—he in billowing shirt, tight trousers, and high boots, she in a formfitting gown whose plunging neckline left little to the imagination.

I spotted Tati, standing in the crowd close by Ileana, her dark hair shining under the colored lights of the glade. The forest queen beckoned; my sister stepped forward and dropped into a low, graceful curtsy. A moment later Tati was being introduced to the new arrivals. I felt a sudden chill. If Ileana singled out anyone for this kind of attention, it was not the little human girls from Piscul Dracului but the most formidable of her own folk, such as the tall Grigori or the most powerful of the soothsayers. I saw the black-booted stranger lift Tati's hand and kiss it in a cool gesture of greeting. Then the Night People seemed to drift away into the shadows under the trees.

Ileana and Marin were not the real power in the Other Kingdom. They presided over the revels and sorted out minor disputes between the forest folk. They made sure the daily life of the wildwood went on in its usual pattern. The folk of the Other Kingdom were often less than forthcoming when questioned about their realm and its rules, but Paula had picked up a great deal at the scholars' table. We knew that the one who was the heart of it all—the one who held the ancient secrets and wove the powerful magic—was Drăguța, the witch of the wood. Drăguța had been in the forest since before the castle of Piscul Dracului sprang to life in the imagination of the eccentric *voivode* who built it. She had dwelt in the depths of the woods since these great oaks were mere sprouting acorns. Drăguța did not come to Full Moon dancing. She stayed in her lair, somewhere out in the wildest and least accessible part of the woods. If folk needed to ask her something, they had to go and find her, for she wouldn't come to them.

Once, I had questioned whether Drăguța really existed at all. Only once. A chorus of horrified gasps and hisses had greeted my doubt—"Don't say that!" "Shh."—as if the witch were everywhere, watching and listening. Drăguța was real, all right, and folk's fear of her was real fear. In our world, Florica spoke her name in a trembling whisper, and Petru crossed himself every time he heard it. For every boy or girl from our valley who had perished in the forest or drowned in the lake, there was a story about Drăguța and her minions, about hands coming up out of the water to drag the hapless under. For every crucifix the villagers had erected on the outskirts of the Piscul Dracului forest to keep evil spirits at bay, there was a tale about someone who had ventured too far and walked into the witch's net. Perhaps it was not surprising that our castle had stood empty for so long. *

High in the Transylvanian woods, at the castle Piscul Draculi, live five daughters and their doting father. It's an idyllic life for Jena, the second eldest, who spends her time exploring the mysterious forest with her constant companion, a most unusual frog. But best by far is the castle's hidden portal, known only to the sisters. Every Full Moon, they alone can pass through it into the enchanted world of the Other Kingdom. There they dance through the night with the fey creatures of this magical realm.

But their peace is shattered when Father falls ill and must go to the southern parts to recover, for that is when cousin Cezar arrives. Though he's there to help the girls survive the brutal winter, Jena suspects he has darker motives in store. Meanwhile, Jena's sister has fallen in love with a dangerous creature of the Other Kingdom--an impossible union it's up to Jena to stop.

When Cezar's grip of power begins to tighten, at stake is everything Jena loves: her home, her family, and the Other Kingdom she has come to cherish. To save her world, Jena will be tested in ways she can't imagine--tests of trust, strength, and true love.

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