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Opening extract from

Ballad

Written by

Maggie Stiefvater

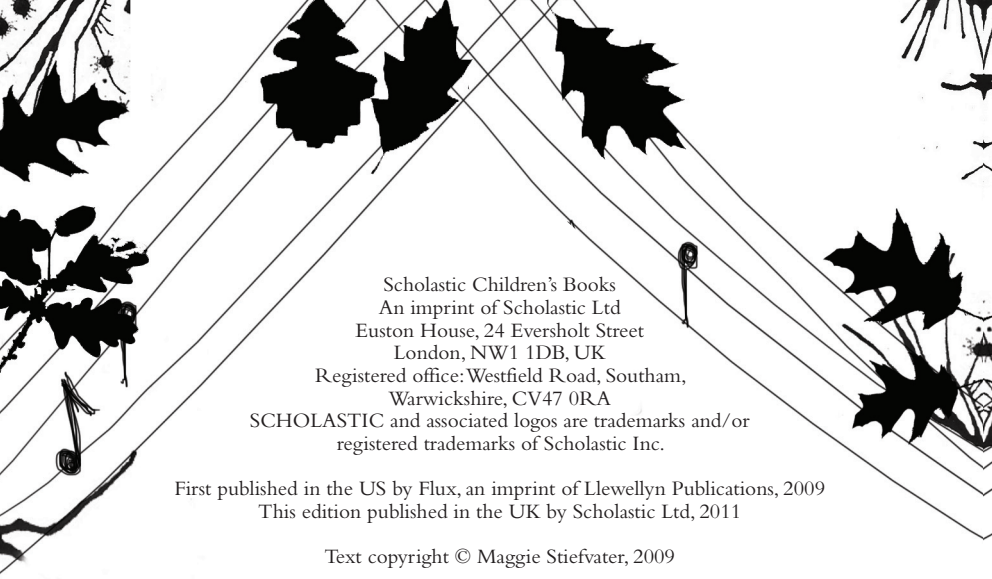
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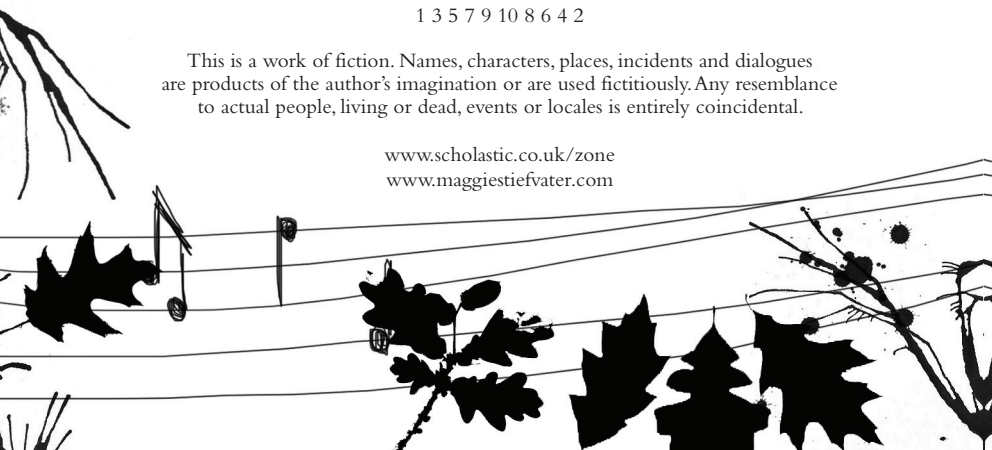
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Leanan Sidhe

I was used to being the hunter. If I saw something I wanted, I stalked it, smelled it, made it mine.

By "it" I mean "him", of course. I liked them young, talented, male. The more handsome the better. Sweetened the deal. I had to look at them until they died, so they might as well be pretty.

I wasn't cruel. I was generous. Every one of them begged me for what I gave him: beauty, inspiration, death. I turned their ordinary lives into something extraordinary. I was the best thing that ever happened to every single one of them.

Really, I wasn't so much hunter as benefactor.

But today, in this autumn wood, I was neither. Someone had summoned me, pulled me from my intangible form into a real body. I didn't see anybody here, but I could still smell the remnants of a spell. I could hear my footfalls on the dry leaves, and the sound made me uneasy. I felt vulnerable in this blood-red wood, noisy and exposed in my form as a human girl, and I wasn't used to it. All around me smelled of

burning thyme and burning leaves, summoning spells and fall bonfires. As soon as I found a bit of human thought to ride on, I was getting out of here.

"Hello, faerie."

I turned around, just in time to see the iron rebar shoved through my face.

NEW MESSAGE

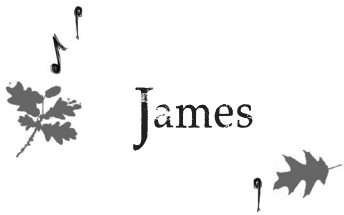
To:
James

R u still psychic? Can u see what our future is at TA? I feel like everything from last summer is still following us. I thought it was over.

From:
Dee

Send your text message? y/**n**
☒ Your message is unsent.

Store your text message? **y**/n
☑ Your message will be stored for 30 days.



James

Music is my life.

I read all the brochures for the Thornking-Ash School of Music before I applied. The brochures said the school would nurture our already promising musical abilities. They promised to challenge us academically. The brochures whispered tales of us emerging from high school as multitalented super-teens sporting academic skills, who would slay Ivy League applications with a single thrust of our extracurriculars.

At the time, I thought – cool. And plus, Deirdre was going, so I had to.

But that was before I actually went. Once I got there, I found out that school is school is school, as Margaret Thatcher would say. Six or half a dozen. Of course, I'd only been at Thornking-Ash for seven days, so maybe I wasn't giving it enough time. But patience was not really my strong suit. And frankly, I just didn't see how taking a few music theory classes and sleeping in a dorm room was supposed to make us any different from regular high-schoolers.

I'd probably have felt differently if I played the damn cello or something, because then I could be in one of the eight million performance groups on campus. When people said "musician" they never seemed to mean "bagpiper". If I heard the phrase "folk musician" one more time, I was going to hit someone.

Anyway, on days one through six, we (my fellow classmen and I) got "orientated". We learned where all our classes were, the names of our teachers, when meals were served in the dining hall, and that the door to the fourth floor of my dorm stuck. By day five, I knew what I was doing. By day six, it was second nature.

By day seven, I was bored. On that seventh evening, I sat in my brother's car and listened to music served angry with a side dish of longing. I had read somewhere that scientists had done a study where they played rock music and classical music to two different sets of rats. I don't remember the details, but after a couple weeks of the study, the classical music rats were peacefully climbing the corporate ladder and wearing Birkenstocks and the rock music rats had gone cannibal and torn each other to bits. Without knowing what band the rock rats had to listen to, I'm not sure what the study was supposed to prove. All I know is, if I had to listen to Pearl Jam for two weeks solid, I'd eat my roommate too.

Anyway, I knew it was the seventh evening because I had seven marks on the back of my right hand. Six upright marks and one slash sideways to make the seven.

I sat there in my own little world with its grey interior and turned the bass up so high I felt it in my butt cheeks. There were strict sound limits in the dorms, especially when students could be practising, so it was hard to find a place to listen to music. That's irony, baby.

I watched the sun sear a red path behind my dorm building. Unlike the rest of the academic buildings, which were stately, column-fronted Georgians, the dorms had no pretensions. They were square boxes with a thousand unblinking eyes for windows.

In the car, the music was loud enough that I didn't hear the tapping on my window at first. When I did finally, the face looking in at me surprised me for some reason: round, ordinary, unsure. My roommate, Paul. He was an oboe player. I think the school thought we would get along together because both our instruments had reeds or something, because we certainly didn't have anything else in common. I rolled down the window.

"Do you want fries with that?" I asked.

Paul laughed, way harder than my words had warranted, and then looked proud of his own daring. I think I scared him.

"Dude, that's funny."

"Just one of the services I offer. What's up?"

"I was heading up to the room to work on, you know, the" – he waved a notebook at me as if it would mean something – "calculus homework. You still want to work on it?"

"Want? No. Need? Yes." I turned down the radio. I was suddenly aware that I had goosebumps across my arms, despite the heat of the day. I pulled my arm into the car. My psychic subconscious was whispering at me in some language I didn't understand, flooding cold through me in a subtle warning: *something weird is afoot here*. It was a feeling I had thought I'd left behind, something I hadn't felt since this summer. I managed to look back at Paul. "Yeah, sure."

Paul's face split into relief, as if he'd expected me to say something else, and he started to chatter about our calculus teacher and the kids in the class. Even if I hadn't been somewhat preoccupied by the iciness trickling along my skin, I wouldn't have listened. People talk too much, and generally if you listen to the first thing they say and the last, the middle will take care of itself.

A sudden phrase pulled my attention back to Paul, like a single voice rising out of many, and I spun the knob on the radio all the way, switching it off.

"Did you say, 'So sing the dead'?"

Paul frowned. "Huh?"

"So sing the dead. Did you say it?"

He shook his head firmly. "No, I said, 'To sing today'. I had sight-singing. With—"

I opened the car door, nodding before he'd even finished his sentence. Even without the radio on, I heard music. And it pulled at me, important in a way that Paul would never be. I had to work to pull a sentence

together for him. "Hey, let's congeal at the room in a few minutes, OK? Just a couple of minutes."

It was as if that misheard phrase – *so sing the dead* – had unlocked a door, and now I could hear music through it. Urgent, insistent music: a lilting, minor-key melody with a lot of weird, archaic accidentals. Sung by a low, male voice that somehow reminded me of everything beyond my reach.

Paul stammered out an agreement as I got out and slammed the car door shut, locking it.

"I've got to run," I said.

"I didn't know you ran," Paul said, but I was already gone.

I sprinted across the car park, past the square dorms, past Yancey Hall with its buttercream columns and Seward Hall with its laughing satyr fountain out front. My sneakers slapped the brick walk as I followed the song, giving in to its tug.

The music grew in intensity, mingling with the music that was always in my mind anyway – the psychic fabric that gave me my bearings, that told me where I was in the world. The brick walk ended but I kept running, stumbling on the uneven, overgrown grass. I felt like I was jumping off the edge of the world. The evening autumn sun blazed across the hills, and all I could think was *I'm too late.*

But there he walked, whoever *he* was – faraway on the hills, nearly out of my sight. He was little more than

a silhouette, a dark figure of uncertain height on an endless hill of dazzling gold. His hands reached out to either side of him, pressing downwards in a gesture that seemed to urge the earth to stay still. Right before he moved too far away for me to discern him from the dark trees far behind him, he stopped.

The music kept on, loud in the way that music in headphones is – sounding like it was made by my brain for my brain alone. But I knew now, somehow, that it wasn't for me. It was for someone or something else, and I just had the misfortune to hear it as well.

I was devastated.

The figure turned towards me. For a long moment, he stood facing me. I was held, anchored to the ground – not by his music, which still called and pushed against the music already in my head and said *grow rise follow* – but by his strangeness. By his fingers, spread over the ground, holding something into the earth; by his shoulders, squared in a way that spoke of strength and unknowability; and most of all, by the great, thorny antlers that grew from his head, spanning the sky like branches.

Then he was gone, and I missed his going in the instant that the sun fell off the edge of the hill, abandoning the world to twilight. I was left standing, a little out of breath, feeling my pulse in the scar above my left ear. I stared after where he had been. I couldn't decide if I wished I had never seen the antlered figure,

so that I could just go on as before, or if I wished I had got here sooner, so I could figure out why I was seeing creatures like him again.

I turned to go back to the school but before I could, I was hit by something solid, right in my gut. It pushed me off balance; I fought to stay upright.

The owner of the body gasped, "Oh my God, I'm sorry!"

The voice stung, familiar. Deirdre. My best friend. Could I still call her that? I gasped, "It's OK. I only need just the one kidney."

Deirdre spun, her face flushed, and her expression changed so quickly I couldn't tell what it had been originally. I couldn't stop staring at her face. I had seen her – grey eyes dominating the slender shape of her pale face – so many times with my eyes shut that it seemed strange to see her with them open.

"James. *James!* Did you see Them? They had to have come right by you!"

I struggled to pull myself together. "Who's 'Them'?"

She stepped away from me to look over the hill, eyes narrowed, squinting into the oncoming darkness. "The faeries. I don't know – four of them? Five?"

She was seriously freaking me out; she moved so quickly that her choppy dark ponytail swung in small circles. "OK, look, Dee, stop moving. You're making me seasick. Now what – faeries? Again?"

Deirdre closed her eyes for a minute. When she

opened them again, she looked more like herself. Less frantic. "So stupid. I'm just weirded out, I guess. It's like I'm seeing them everywhere."

I didn't know what to say. It kind of hurt just to look at her, in a way I'd forgotten. Sort of like a splinter – not when you first get it under your skin, but the slow ache after it has been taken out.

She shook her head. "Can I be any more stupid? Seriously, it's been for ever since I've seen you and I'm already whining in the first five minutes. I should be jumping out of my skin with happiness. I'm – I'm sorry I haven't gotten a chance to see you yet."

For a moment I'd thought that "I'm sorry" would be followed by something else. Something intensely meaningful that would show some recognition that she'd hurt me. When it didn't come, I really wanted to pout and make her feel bad, but I didn't have the balls. Instead, I rescued her, like the gallant, punishment-loving idiot that I am. "Well, the brochure did say that the campus was more than fifteen hectares. It could've been *years* before we ran into each other."

Deirdre bit her lip. "I had *no* idea how crazy the class schedule would be. But – wow. It's so good to see you."

There was a long, awkward moment where a hug would've usually happened, before last summer. Before Luke, and way before that text message I'd sent – the one neither of us could forget.

"You're very tanned," I said. A lie; Dee didn't tan.

Dee sort of smiled. "And you cut your hair."

I ran a hand over my head, let my fingers worry over the new scar above my ear. "They had to shave it to put the stitches in. I just shaved all of it to match. I wanted to shave my initials in it, but – this will come as a shock to you – I just now realized that my initials spell JAM. It was kind of humiliating."

Dee laughed. I was absurdly pleased that she did. "It sort of suits you," she said, but her eyes were on my hands and the scribbled words that covered both of them up to the wrist. More ink than skin.

I wanted to ask her how she was, about the faeries, about the text, but I couldn't seem to say anything important. "Better than it would you."

She laughed again. It wasn't a real laugh, but that was OK, because I hadn't really meant it to be funny. I just needed something to say.

"What are you doing here?"

Both Dee and I spun and found ourselves facing one of the teachers: Eve Linnet. Dramatic Lit. She was a small, pale ghost in the dim light. Her face might've been pretty if she hadn't been scowling. "This isn't school grounds."

Something nagged me as wrong, though it took me a second to realize what. She'd come from the hills, not from the school.

Linnet craned her neck as if she'd just noticed Deirdre; Dee's face was red as if we'd been caught doing something. Linnet's voice was sharp. "I don't know what

sort of schools you two came from, but we don't allow any of *that* sort of behaviour here."

Before last summer, I would've made some joke about Dee and I – about how it wasn't like that, how I was her bound love slave since birth, or how nothing had happened because Dee was repulsed by a certain chemical component in my skin. But instead I just said, "It wasn't like that."

I knew it sounded guilty, and she must've thought so too, because she said, "Oh, it wasn't? Then why were you all the way out here?"

I'd had it. I looked past her, towards the hills, and her eyes darted along my line of vision. "We were waiting for you."

Dee looked at me sharply, but not in the way Linnet did. Linnet looked angry, or afraid. For a long moment she didn't say anything at all, and then, finally, she said, "I don't think any of us should be here right now. Let's go back to the dorms, and I'll just forget this whole thing ever happened. It's a terrible way to begin a school year, anyway. In trouble."

As Linnet turned to lead us back to the school, Dee cast an admiring glance in my direction, and then rolled her eyes towards Linnet, thoughts plain: she's crazy!

I shrugged and allowed Dee half a grin. I didn't think there was anything wrong with Linnet's sanity, though. I think that I wasn't the only one who had gone running out to meet that music.

NEW MESSAGE

To:
James

Last nite wz weird. I miss talking like we used 2. Not that u would want 2 hear about this stuff i'm thinking. Like luke. I know what heartache means now. I feel like puking when i think of him.

From:
Dee

Send your text message? y/**n**
☒ Your message is unsent.

Store your text message? **y**/n
☑ Your message will be stored for 30 days.