

SAMHAIN

by Margaret Mansfield

Halloween was almost here and from the minute they arose, the children were impatient for the day to end. All around them adults were busy readying the tunnels for the night's festivities.

Pathways, usually dim and ordinary looking, were gradually being transformed into a mysterious neverland. Realistic spider webs hung in every conceivable place. Skeletons hid in strategic recesses and pumpkins waiting to be lit decorated Pascal's pipes. To complete the effect, black paper bats made by the younger children hung suspended from the tunnel roofs.

Delicious smells wafted through the air, making everyone's mouth water in anticipation. Roast meat, stuffing and candied sweet potatoes would be heaped on platters including many other goodies tonight. William was famous for his meals. A feast was an important thing to William, the preparation of which he approached with a seriousness not even Vincent dared trifle with.

Positively no one, other than the staff assigned kitchen duty that week, was allowed in the kitchen. Meals for several days before such an event were quick, meager affairs as William diligently applied herself to his specialties. By the day of the feast, everyone was ravenous and eagerly anticipating the glorious event.

Vincent finally admitted defeat and dismissed the younger children early from lessons. Try as he did, he could not keep their attention on school work. Where to properly put commas in sentences was, for the moment, irrelevant to them.

Sighing, Vincent listened to the whooping and yelling as they made a mad dash for the study chamber's exit. Joining in the spirit of the moment he smiled to himself, watching as they all tried to crowd into the eerily decorated tunnels at once.

Ever the teacher, Vincent belatedly thought of a way he could have used to make today's lesson interesting and successful. *'Hindsight is better than no sight'* he reminded himself, filing away the idea for future use. Next year, if they decided to celebrate Halloween in the same manner, he would be prepared. The sentences he used would all relate to Halloween. Hopefully, that might keep their attention a little longer.

With the extra time, Vincent now had while waiting for the older boys and girls, he leafed through his notes refreshing his memory on the subject of Samhain (*Samhain or Sauin is a Gaelic festival on 1 November marking the end of the harvest season in autumn and beginning of winter or the "darker half" of the year*) Druids (*Druids were an educated, high-ranking priestly class in ancient Celtic cultures, serving as priests, judges, teachers, lore keepers, and political advisors, deeply connected to nature and astronomy, who oversaw rituals, interpreted omens, and maintained traditions*) and Halloween. The older children had been independently researching these topics in Father's vast library for several days. Vincent was interested to hear what they had discovered.

By eleven, all his students were present and eager to share their findings. Vincent was a great teacher and all the kids loved and adored him. To most of the young teens he was a hero.

After greeting them, Vincent waited until they all found seats before opening the lesson.

"Well, I'm glad to see all of you showed up today, since we have had the last several days off. I am sure you

found all sorts of interesting facts about the assigned topics. Who would like to share first?"

"Well," piped up Luke, eager to go first. "I read all kinds of things like you said, Vincent. These Druids lived far back in the past, before Christ was even born. They were around before people started keeping written records. Most everything we know comes from the Romans, who wrote about them hundreds and hundreds of years later.

"The Druids didn't write things down. Not even the important stuff like the history of their tribe. For some reason, which wasn't too clear in the book I was reading, they just didn't seem to believe in it like we do today. They handed down all their important stuff by word of mouth. It was something they called '*oral tradition*'."

"Yeah, I read that too," put in Jesse. "They really weren't a people either. Not a whole tribe like the English, anyway. Druids were special people in all the tribes. Each tribe or clan had a few of them. They had to go to Druid school for a long time before they could practice. Mostly they studied all kinds of things by living with older Druids. The older Druids were like the wise men - philosophers, the book called them."

"They worshipped nature and the elements," offered Heather, when Jesse stopped talking. "Trees, especially the oak, were very sacred to them. Mostly, they held their ceremonies in the forest clearings. The Earth Mother was someone very important to them and they believed that she controlled the seasons and made the crops grow. When there was drought or too much rain, they thought she was angry with them and they would make her a sacrifice. Usually it was an animal, but sometimes it was a human one.

"Vincent," continued Heather, her eyes big as saucers. "They would spill the blood on the ground so that the Earth Mother wouldn't be angry with them anymore."

'Ugh!' said Eric, making a face. "That's gross! How could they believe that pouring blood all over the ground would make it rain, Vincent?"

"Well Eric, you must remember that these people lived a long, long time ago. They didn't have the knowledge of science that we do today. They were very superstitious."

"Oh," replied Eric, still looking slightly puzzled.

Vincent was pleased at how well the lesson was going. Looking around, his eyes fell on Katie. Calling on her, he asked, "And what did you find out, Katie?"

"Like Jesse already said, Vincent. I read most of the same stuff. But I also read that many people believed that the Druids were responsible for building '*Stonehenge*.' They didn't. '*Stonehenge*' was built long before there '*were*' any Druids. The Druids used the ruins at '*Stonehenge*' for some of their meetings. Father helped me so my research, and he says that the people of '*Stonehenge*' were even older and more primitive than the Druids. Can you imagine that! If the Druids were doing human sacrifices, what were the people who lived at '*Stonehenge*' doing? Father says they used to be headhunters and lots of human skulls were found around '*Stonehenge*'."

"Wow!" whispered Christopher. "This is as good as one of Father's ghost stories. Maybe he'd let us tell all about the Druids tonight at story-telling," he added, getting more excited.

"I don't think that would be a very good idea, Christopher," said Vincent softly. "We wouldn't want to frighten the younger children."

"Aw, come on, Vincent!" Christopher wheedled. "Father's stories are just as spooky."

"That is true, but the little ones know beforehand that Father's tales are just made up stories. They have been listening to Father tell those stories over and over for a long time. They know the things he tells them didn't really happen. '*Stonehenge*' and the Druids are real. It might give them bad dreams or nightmares,"

explained Vincent patiently.

"I *'guess'* so," Christopher reluctantly agreed. "Maybe it would be a little too scary for them. The Druids were magicians and used all kinds of spells and knew how to tell fortunes. They could look into the future," he added.

"Narcissa can do that," whispered Sara, the youngest student present. She was only 11, but was a little too old for the younger children's class, so she was here with the teens. "She can sometimes tell what's going to happen in the future. Does that make her a Druid?"

Vincent quelled the laughter of the other students with a look. "No, Sara. Narcissa is not a Druid, but she does have some of the same special gifts and powers that they had. In some ways, she's probably a lot like them."

"Does she believe we stay alive after our body dies too, like they did?" asked the little girl.

"I don't really know, Sara. But most people believe there is life after death, in one form or another. What did the Druids believe on this subject? Did anyone read anything about it?"

"Well, I read a few things that might fit," offered Matthew hesitantly. He was one of the older of Vincent's students, but was very shy and serious. Vincent was glad to see him volunteer.

"They believed in the transmigration of the soul," the boy offered.

"They believed in *'what'?*" asked Luke, puzzled. "What the *'heck'* does transmigration mean?"

"Well, they believed that the soul is immortal and when the body dies, it passes into another body, like a baby or an animal or even a tree," explained Matthew. "The Druids held ceremonies where they wore clothes with bird's feathers and bones sewn into them. They believed this would give them the power to fly and change into other shapes. They even believed they had special powers to fly through space and time when their souls were looking for new bodies."

"You *'made' that up,*" challenged Katie.

"No. He didn't." Vincent quickly took charge of the discussion. "Matthew is right. They *'did'* believe all those things."

Steering the lesson to another topic, Vincent asked if anyone had come across information about how the Druids were involved with Halloween.

"Oh! I read all about that," called out Jenny. "Pascal loaned me a book about Halloween. The Druids were mentioned in it. The Druids who celebrated Halloween came from Ireland and Britain. The other Druids came from France and Germany."

"They were located all over Western Europe, Great Britain and Ireland," explained Vincent. "The Druids were a special class and traveled freely between clans and tribes. Wherever they went, they were usually respected and accepted, except in the very beginning, when the Druids from Germany and France first began going to Britain and Ireland."

"Oh," said Jenny. "Anyway, the Druids in Ireland and Britain believed in this one god they called Samhain (*Saowen*). He was the lord of the dead. Some of them also called him the Lord of Darkness. They believed that on Halloween, Samhain released all the souls and spirits of the people who had died that year and allowed them to revisit their earthly homes. They also believe he unleashed supernatural creatures that could harm them. They made sacrifices to him."

"The Druids would make the people put out their old hearth fires, and then they would light a new one out of special oak branches. Everyone would relight new fires in their houses with these special branches. They believed this warded off the spirits set free by Samhain."

"The people would dress up in costumes with animal heads and skins and dance around the fire. They also told fortunes and tried to read the future."

Suddenly, they heard a racket outside in the corridor, and seconds later little Joanie and Alicia came crashing in, giggling and put of breath from running.

"Have you come to join in our lesson?" asked Vincent in mock seriousness.

"No," said both little girls, sidling over to him.

"William sent us," said Joanie.

"He wants us to find out if you are available to help him bring some things down to the Gwest Hall. Are you?"

Vincent gave the older children a look that stifled all laughter. Bending down, he hugged both girls. "You go tell William that I am almost on my way."

The little girls took off, not even bothering to give the older kids a look. They felt important, having been allowed to skip their lessons that day, while the older kids had to go to theirs.

Standing up, Vincent said. "I guess we shall have to end our discussion. It seems my services are needed by William. I am sure Father has assigned all of you a task for this afternoon. So have something to eat, and then report for your duties. I will see you later at the feast."

Early the next morning, Vincent and Catherine walked through the tunnels, heading to their chamber. Edie walked beside Catherine, almost asleep on her feet. Vincent carried a slumbering child in his arms. Everyone, even Father, was quiet. They were all exhausted. Dawn had broken over the horizon minutes before, just as they had entered the tunnels through the culvert in Central Park.

Catherine's ferry ride had been a big success. Everyone had a wonderful time. Many of the tunnel denizens had experienced things that had been missing from their lives for years. Vincent was sure the evening's events would be talked about for days to come.

Reaching the tunnel branching where they all split up, Vincent handed little Luke back to his mother. He and Catherine showed Edie to the guest chamber in their wing. Bidding her goodnight seemed funny since it was morning, but Father had decided that no work should be done that day. Everyone was just too tired.

Raising his hands in characteristic Father-fashion, he had humorously remarked, "What's one more day? Besides," he added, glancing fondly at Mary, "It's not every night that a man gets engaged and stays up all night watching the stars. Thank you, Catherine, it was a truly wonderful night." Patting her hand in departure, he escorted Mary to her chamber, leaving Vincent and Catherine alone.

Vincent and Catherine bid their retreating backs a goodnight and went into their own chamber. Within minutes they were in bed. With Catherine snuggled by his side, Vincent's eyes quickly grew heavy and closed.

As sleep reached out its enveloping arms to embrace him, he slipped through one of the cracks in the universe and into the mists of time - into a long forgotten time.

'They found him lying beside the dugout near the lake. At first, they thought him dead, and in disgust nearly turned away. His anguished groan brought them quickly back. 'His injuries were many but he would live,' Nadruk said. 'He would live long enough to provide the dark night's sacrifice.'

Carefully, they brought him to Urbrect's hut and placed him in my care. The healing powers were in my hands, passed down through generations. They bade me tend him, and keep him safe, warning me not to

talk of the purpose of his care.

As I looked upon his bruised and broken body, I felt sorrow. His fate was too horrible to think about. But Nadruk, our holy man had spoken, 'The Gods have provided a stranger who will serve as our sacrifice to the dark lord.'

All of our people would be blessed with another cycle of life. For this I was grateful. Had the stranger not appeared, one of those dear to me might have been chosen.

It had been a hard two years our clan had endured. Our people were continually hungry. The crops had been late and the harvest scarce. There had been little rain to nourish the seed.

We lost most of what we had to the raiders who lived deep in the forest. Fierce men, they took few captives and left many dead. We had been raided many times this past year.

'They want our land and our women.' said Urbrect, our leader. His only daughter had been taken in the raid several moons gone past.

Nadruk held his tongue during the daylight, but when we came together around the nighttime fire, he predicted more raids. The bird bones he was always rolling told him this. The Earth Mother was angry. Nadruk insisted she required a sacrifice.

Urbrect sat silent and withdrawn, staring into the fire. He was not the same man since his daughter had been stolen. Talk of human sacrifice made him sullen. For all the years he had led our clan, there had only been animals offered at the feast of the dark lord. I had never seen a human sacrifice. The thought turned my stomach. But Nadruk went on with his chants and his foretellings until he had the people believing that this is what must be.

Nadruk was much younger than Urbrect, and the people now looked to his magic power for comfort. When Urbrect was no more with us, Nadruk would be leader. This thought also turned my stomach. Nadruk was not to my liking. He had not yet taken a woman from among us to mate. I secretly suspected that his attempted kindness to me held the promise of unpleasantness in the future.

He would have me if he could. It was a thought that was with me constantly. The way he watched me made my skin turn cold. His eyes were always upon me. Only Urbrect kept him back - Nadruk feared his wrath. The old leader disliked him, and this he knew. It went beyond two men battling for leadership. There was something more between them. I sensed the anger when they were near each other.

If Nadruk hadn't been a holy man, Urbrect would have challenged him years ago while his strength was still with him. Now, it was too late. We both knew this. Still, while he could, the old man I now thought of as Father would keep me safe.

Urbrect was brother to my father. We were of the same blood and because of his daughter Tasreen, he had a fondness for me. As children, his daughter and I were always together. My mother was lost to a fever which swept the village when I was only ten. Father had turned in upon himself, losing interest in everything. My care was left to Urbrect's wife.

Ursala, wife to Urbrect, was good to me. Her care was that of a mother. I was blessed in this. Tasreen and I grew together. We were closer than sisters. Her loss saddened me almost as much as it did her father. We still talked of her when we were by ourselves and mourned her loss.

Since my father's death in one of last year's raids, I had lived in the dwelling of Urbrect. Tasreen and I cared for the aging leader with much love. Our biggest duty was to keep Nadruk away from him. Tasreen had hated Nadruk also. She would never tell me why. She was six cycles older than I and I often wondered if he had tried to mate her against her will. Nadruk would do something like that.

The care of our people lay heavy upon Urbrect's heart. To him they were more than a responsibility, they were his children, his family. He spent much time among the people trying to ease their anguish. He had tried to get the people to move from this place by the lake on the outskirts of the huge forest. But they had been here for longer than anyone alive could remember. They did not want to move away from the star patterns which had governed their lives for so long. They did not want to leave the forest of the holy oak.

When the people had gone, Urbrect bid me take the man's rags off and clean his wounds. Leaving me to this task, he went to the hut of old Razel looking for herbs to pack in the man's wounds.

Alone with the stranger, I studied him in the softly flickering firelight. He was larger and broader than our people. More than this I could not tell as he was wrapped in a large hooded cape and those parts of him which could be seen were filthy.

Putting water on to heat, I gathered up some old clothing and ripped it into strips which I would use to bind his wounds. What we would find for clothing, I did not know. Nothing I could think of among the few articles Urbrect owned would fit this stranger. For now, I would worry only about cleaning and binding his wounds. Clothing could be found later.

He lay on his stomach and it was a struggle getting at the clasp which held his cloak around his neck. Tugging it free, I examined it with interest. It was made of strips of heavy cloth and leather sewn together. The outer hood was lined in leather and there was leather piping on the shoulder pieces. It smelled of smoke--fire, leather and several other scents hard to name, but appealing. Putting it aside for the moment, I knew I would find some way to clean it for the stranger. It was too handsome a piece of clothing to discard.

Turning back to the injured man, I quickly stripped off his jersey, boots and pants getting my first good look at his body. Fine silky-blond hair covered most of him. I found it soft and pleasant to the touch. Busily, I set about cleaning the wounds and cuts I could easily reach without turning him over. He was too heavy and I would need Urbrect's help.

Sitting down to wait, I reached for the cloak, my mind already working on a way to clean it, when I discovered an inner pocket. Reaching in, I pulled out a badly worn leather pouch. Interested, I opened it and was shocked to discover things only a holy man would have in his possession.

Bones, feathers of birds, several small cloth-wrapped packets of herbs and potions, and a collection of long, pointy animal teeth. At the bottom of the pouch wrapped in a piece of split, clean leather, I uncovered a stone similar to the talisman our holy men carry. These stones I knew contained great personal power, but would only work for the owner. They were handed down from father to son and were used as protection from harm. They were usually inscribed with markings important to the owner's family.

This stone was flat and worn smooth by the handling of many generations. Turning it over, I tossed it down, scared by what was carved deep into the stone's surface. A large cat-like animal stared up at me from where the stone landed face up on the floor. In my mind's eye, I could see this beast stalking through the brush stealthily perusing its prey. Pondering the stone, I wondered at its meaning. I had never seen such an animal. None like it roamed our lands.

I was still staring at the stone when Urbrect returned. Quickly I showed him what I had found. Shaking his head in agreement at my thoughts, he glanced at the man who lay before us. This was no ordinary man, his look said. Like I, he believed the man to be a holy man to some tribe far to the south. How he came to be on our shores in his condition was a mystery.

Gathering up all the things, we returned them to the pouch and hid it for safe keeping. If Nadruk discovered this man was a holy man like himself, he would try to steal the pouch and conceal it from the people. As superstitious as they were, he might never be able to convince them to sacrifice a holy man. Urbrect thought it best to conceal the fact also, until we saw whether the man would live.

Gently, we turned the man over and received another shock. Quickly we backed away. His face and hands, till now hidden, were not those of an ordinary man. They were much like that of the animal depicted on his stone. We had never seen such a one as this. We wondered where he had come from.

Once, so many years ago I could hardly remember the incident, strangers from far to our south had come to collect herbs for their medicines. Caught by an early winter, they had spent the season with us. They told us many stories from their land and among them was a tale of a race of people who lived deep within the mountain caves. Some of these people they say, looked strangely like the large animal which also inhabited their land. We had listened to the tales, never believing they were more than that - tales spun to help pass away the long night around a fire. Not so anymore - here before us was living proof that such a people existed.

Cautiously, we cleaned him as best we could and tended to his wounds. Covering him over, we built up the fire to keep him warm, and waited.

We nearly lost him several times in the passing days. It was hard getting nourishment into him. He was weak and kept passing out. I sat by his side and tended him through the days and far into the long nights. To help pass the time, I told him the stories of our tribe going back to our very beginnings.

Gradually, he grew stronger, until one day I turned from banking the fire to find clear blue eyes studying my every move intently. His eyes were of a blue I had never seen except on the sunny days when brilliant sunlight danced across the lake's water. None of our people had eyes like these. Deeply penetrating, their gaze held me until he spoke. What little I did understand of his language was lost in the melodious tone of his voice. His whispery voice had a rich, rough undertone which I found pleasing.

Patiently, I tried to tell him where he was and explain how we had cared for him. He seemed bewildered and quickly fell back asleep. Assured now that he would live, I set about gathering scraps of cloth and leather from anyone who would part with them and set about making him a set of clothes.

Nadruk finally came to see how the stranger was doing. His presence brought a heaviness to the hut. Somehow, the stranger sensed my distress and a soft growl erupted from deep within his chest. Nadruk quickly backed toward the door and stood peering in shock as he looked upon the stranger's face. We had told no one of his differences, or the fact that we believed him to be a magician.

A furtive look of satisfaction suddenly flickered across Nadruk's features and I sensed trouble. He was plotting something. Watching him, I knew Nadruk had thought of some way to use this stranger's differences for his own evil purposes. Leering at me, he turned and swiftly left the hut.

The uneasy feelings I had about Nadruk faded over the next few days when nothing happened. For his own hidden reasons, Nadruk stayed away from Urbrect's hut. Winter would be upon us soon and the next few weeks were spent in getting ready for the cold season ahead. While Urbrect supervised the people in these activities, I was left alone for long periods of time tending the stranger.

In the beginning, he rarely talked but as the days passed and we became comfortable with each other, he joined in our conversations. As Urbrect and I sat around the hearth fire at night he would lie on his sleeping skins and listen to whatever we were talking about.

More and more I was drawn in a strange way to this unusual looking man. He had not yet told us his name. A name was a sacred thing and it was not right to ask someone to share it until they were ready. My eyes sought his frequently. There were so many questions to be asked and answered - so much I wanted to know. But I was shy and tongue-tied around him.

One night, I suddenly realized that I was acting like Tasreen and her friends, when they used to flirt with the boys who followed them around preening and demonstrating their manhood. Coloring at the thought, I hid my face from him, lest he see the sudden hotness in my cheeks. He made me feel strange and I was often

confused.

His name is Estileon. What a strange sounding name. When I asked him what it meant, he paused and then told me 'son of the lion.' Quickly going to our secret place in the hut, I brought his pouch to him. His eyes lit with gratitude when I handed it to him. Reaching in, he drew out the stone. Pointing to the animal carved there he said, 'lion.'

When I asked him how it happened, he hung his great head for a moment and then looked at me. He told me he didn't know. Sometimes among his people, it just was. Sensing his discomfort, we talked of other things.

There came a day when he asked if there was water for bathing. I began to heat some but he signaled that he wanted water for his whole body. Understanding that he wished to bathe, I got his cloak and handed it to him. Gratefully he took it and covered himself so that none could see him. Skirting the huts of the people, I brought him to the water's edge and left him there.

He was gone a long time and I grew uneasy. Maybe he had lost his way, or maybe he had taken the opportunity and left. My heart jumped and began to ache. Quickly, I set out toward the lake hoping to find him. The thought of never seeing him again, never looking into his beautiful eyes or listening to his wonderful voice suddenly became unbearable.

Hurrying along, I broke into the clearing surrounding the lake and there he sat on a rock pulling on his boots. He didn't see me at first and I was able to watch him unseen. He didn't have on his cloak and as he stood and faced my direction, the sight almost took my breath away. Fresh from his bath, his hair was the color of the oats which grew in the fields. Damp tendrils wisped around his forehead. Shafts of golden sunlight played in his shoulder-length hair making it look like a golden cloud around his head. A slight breeze ruffled the hair as he bent to catch up his cloak. Massive shoulders rippled under the material of the shirt I had made for him.

Suddenly, he seemed to sense my presence and as he whipped his head around in my direction, our eyes locked. Out here in the sunlight, they were an even more dazzling blue than in the dimness of Urbrect's hut. His eyes held mine as we stared across the clearing at one another.

Strange feelings never before felt coursed through my body leaving me feeling weak. Some inner sense told me that he, too, felt these things. Words were unnecessary. Slowly, I approached him, wanting nothing more than for him to fold me in his arms and hold me close to his heart. He in his turn moved toward me with gracefully, fluid movements.

Quickly, he covered the space between us and held out his arms. I found myself within his light embrace. We stood, not talking, for what seemed like a long time, when suddenly I heard his soft voice whisper tenderly in my ear. He told me things a woman in love would want to hear, and I was happy.

For the first time in my 18 cycles, I was at peace with myself. My mother had died while I was still a child and my father had all but rejected me. I was raised by people who were good to me but I had always felt alone, as if I was not whole, as if a piece of me were missing. Being with Estileon made me feel complete. I felt connected to him in a way I had never before felt.

As if reading my very thoughts, he told me that I was the reason he had come to our land. He had seen me in a dream many cycles before and had set out from his land to find me. Somehow, no one knew why, he told me; 'it was so with his kind - this seeking out a special person they sensed they were meant to join with.'

Over the next days we shared much of our lives with each other. He already knew much about mine from the nights I talked to him when he first came to us.

He told me many things about himself, but not how he came to be as he was. I had grown to love the

unusual face and never tired of looking upon it. Curious, I finally asked him and he could tell me little. I sensed a sadness in him as he told me simply, 'I was born, I survived.'

In spite of his physical differences, Estileon was a holy man in the land where he lived, just as Urbrect and I had suspected. He was one of several who lived with his clan. Listening, I found it strange to think of a clan that would have more than one holy man.

'They were called Druids' he told me. All the tribes in the lands surrounding his had their own Druids. These holy men moved among the tribes and were welcomed wherever they went. They were looked upon as the tribes's spokesmen as well as lawmakers and judges. They were also in charge of the sacrifice.

At mention of sacrifices, I was reminded that the feast of our own God was fast approaching, and I became upset. I had begun to sense a restlessness in the people, as if they were waiting for something to happen. They had been strangely quiet lately, and none had come near Urbrect's hut to spy on us. Nadruk also had stayed away. But now, when I left the hut to gather wood or water, the people watched me furtively. I was sure Nadruk was up to something. Urbrect went nightly to sit with the people at the nighttime fire, but the people were silent in front of him. He, too, felt uneasy in his spirit.

We were cautious, and Estileon rarely left the hut. Only when all the people were away gathering, or darkness had fallen over the village did we feel it safe for him to venture out. Soon he would be well enough to travel and we would leave.

The people of his clan were waiting for his return. He could sense this when he held the magic stone of his family. His people had believed that it gave them the power to travel over time and space when in great danger. He had never had cause to use it in this manner, nor had his father before him and therefore didn't know if it would really work. Both his father and his father's father had died while he was still young.

He continued on, telling me that the man who had raised him, the one he called 'my father' had much sorrow in his heart waiting for his son to return. Estileon worried that the man would think him dead. His father had been against this journey. He wanted to start for home as soon as possible.

I was uneasy thinking of going to live in the caves. I tried to hide this from him. It was impossible. He seemed able to read my very thoughts - at least sense my unease. Trying to ease my mind he told me of the beautiful wonders of his home.

He told me of the cavern where winds blew with such a fury the people had to hug the walls while going down the steep steps into the great cave below. He told of how your voice was carried away in this place only to come back at you in a booming way from the surrounding walls. Also he told of a marvelous wall of water which tumbled from far overhead into the pools below. His people bathed in the misty waters of this place. I shuddered, thinking of how cold that water must be until he explained that somehow it mixed with water coming up from below the cavern. The water under the cavern's floor was hot and the mixture provided a warm bath. There were places below that no man to his knowing had ever gone before. I had never heard of such marvels.

'But what of the sun, moon and the sky? What of the green growing things? How do your people live without them? Where do you grow your food?' I asked him many questions, interested to hear what he would say.

Just as he was about to explain these things to me, we were interrupted by Urbrect's return. By looking at him we could tell something was wrong. We listened as he told us we must prepare to leave that night. He had overheard some of the children and women talking of the approaching feast. They had talked of how they would have a special sacrifice this year. A man-beast had been provided by the Lord Samhain himself. They were very excited about this. They had been told of Estileon, but had not yet seen him. His death, Nadruk had told them, would bring many crops for next year's harvest. His blood would nourish the earth

and cause it to produce once again.

So now we knew what Nadruk had been plotting. We knew how he had persuaded the people to allow the sacrifice. He had told them that the dark lord, knowing that they had never sacrificed a human before, had sent them one who was both, so they would be sure to know that this was his wish.

In a short time we were ready to travel. Urbrect packed us a pouch of food stores while I gathered my belongings. There were but a few pieces of clothing and some items to remind me of my childhood home. As I sat by the fire waiting for full dark to fall, I thought of leaving Urbrect behind.

We had begged him to come with us but the stubborn old man would have none of it. 'This was his home. These were his people.' he told us. He had been their leader for many, many cycles. With his daughter gone, they were his life - all that he had left.

I feared for Urbrect. Once the people discovered he had allowed us to leave, what would they do to him? I pondered this thing in my heart until long after darkness claimed the interior of the hut. From the darkness, Urbrect whispered that 'it was time to leave.'

Fondly kissing the old man, we quietly left the hut. As we departed the village a pain of sadness ripped through me until I thought of what would happen to my beloved if we stayed.

We made better progress than I thought possible. Estileon had no trouble seeing in the dark, and I soon trusted him to lead me along the forest paths. A little over an hour into our journey Estileon stopped abruptly and motioned me to silence. Obeying, I wondered what had caused his hesitation until I, too, caught the faint sound of laughter far ahead. Stealthily, we crept along the trail until we came to the edge of a clearing and what I saw from the cover of the surrounding trees caused my heart to freeze.

A raiding party of the fierce forest people were camped in the tiny clearing. This close to our village could only mean one thing. With the coming of dawn they planned to raid our village.

After watching them for several minutes, Estileon made signs that told me he wanted us to skirt around their camp and continue on our way. Silent tears of distress coursed down my face, as I shook my head and pointed back the way we came. I could not leave my people to so cruel a fate. Not even what they had planned to do to Estileon changed this.

My people were so few in number that I knew, from seeing the size of the raiding party, they would cease to be on the morrow. Few would survive and those that did would face a fate worse than death living as slaves to these fierce barbaric people.

With a look of resignation, Estileon turned in the direction of my village and we began our return. Entering the village some time later, we made our way to Urbrect's hut and woke the sleeping old man. Quickly, we told him what was about to happen and set out to wake the others.

The children were taken to a place of safety down by the lake where the old women were left to guard them. Everyone else prepared for the raid. Looking around at the people hurrying here and there I knew we were sadly outnumbered. Even with the women and most of the old people fighting we were outmatched.

Dawn's dim light had just broken over the horizon when the attack began. As the forest people broke into the village, the silence was shattered by their fierce war cries. Above these voices, however, could suddenly be heard the ferocious growls of an enraged beast. Confusion broke out as the people searched for the source of the snarls. Shocked, we watched as Estileon, unarmed charged the intruders tossing them about, ripping them to shreds. Heartened by what they saw, my people joined the fight.

In what seemed like no time at all it was over. What I was sure would be defeat for my people turned into a total victory. Dead and badly wounded enemy bodies littered the village clearing. Few escaped, and those who did would tell their people of the defeat they had suffered. I doubted they would ever bother my people

again.

Searching for Estileon, I panicked when I did not see him. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye I saw him striding towards me with what looked like a body in his arms. As he came nearer, I realized it was Urbrect he carried and my heart held much fear until I saw the old man move. He was hurt, but it was only a flesh wound which would heal in time. Several others had wounds which old Razel was busy tending to, but none of our people was dead or missing, except Nadruk.

He had disappeared shortly before the raid began and had not fought in the battle. This was a good thing I felt. Now the people had seen behind the mask he wore. They saw him for what he was, an evil man and a coward. They pronounced him outlaw, and doubted they would ever see him again.

The people praised Estileon and openly welcomed him. They now believed that he had been sent to be their protector. No more talk of human sacrifice was heard.

My heart was filled with happiness and joy, as I watched them examine his features with awe. Some felt the need to touch his hands and face with love and gratitude. This he allowed with a quiet dignity apparent to all.

The children flocked around him and immediately he became a favorite with them. They followed him everywhere. His gentle patience drew them.

It was decided that we would stay and spend the feast of the dark lord with my people, before starting out for Estileon's homeland. Thoughts of our leaving saddened the people but they understood. Estileon also had people and they were waiting for his return. He promised to visit as often as possible and this made them happy.

The day of the feast dawned crisp and clear. The village was in a state of intense activity as women prepared food for the evening's feast. Although there would not be much to eat, we were grateful that we would all be there to share it.

Hearth fires were left to burn themselves out, as the men gathered branches from the sacred oaks. Tonight's bonfire would provide the sparks to relight this cycle's new hearth fires.

As dusk approached we gathered in the holy circle waiting for Urbrect to light the new fire. All was prepared and after the fire was lit there would be feasting and dancing far into the night. As we silently waited, the air was pierced by a sudden, loud scream. Turning to see what had caused the disturbance, an arrow pierced my breast causing a sharp pain which coursed through my body. While falling, I heard cries of anger and distress from the people. Dimly I also heard a familiar roar which I knew was a cry of anguish from my beloved.

Nadruk, enraged by hatred, had returned to the village to take his revenge. As I lay on the ground, I could hear him pleading in panic as the people surrounded him.

Curiously, my body no longer hurt. I could feel myself slipping away from this life as my spirit began to leave and float free. Looking down as I rose into the air, I could see the people below gathered around Estileon, as he called my name in anguish. 'Cathrick, Cathrick.' He gathered my lifeless body close to his great heart.

As I left the clearing, borne away by the mists of light surrounding my spirit, I dimly heard his whispered words, 'Know that I love you! Wherever you go, someday, somewhere we will be together again'.

The silence of the chamber was shattered by a roar of un bearable anguish. Catherine's eyes flew open in panic as she was wrenched from sleep to find herself enfolded closely in Vincent's arms. She could feel his heart beating wildly as he continued to roar.

"Vincent! What in 'God's' name is going on?" Father's harried voice brought his son's eyes into focus. By

the look of Father's disheveled appearance, Catherine could tell that he, too, had been pulled from a deep sleep.

Entering the chamber, Father approached the bed. Gently, he put his hand to Vincent's head. "Everything is all right, Vincent," he spoke soothingly. "That must have been some nightmare. You have not had one like this in a long time. What was it about?"

Vincent's body gave one last shudder as he lay back and looked at Catherine and Father.

"Yes! A nightmare all about Druids and Samhain and human sacrifices. We were studying all about it in class yesterday. Father, it seemed so real. I have not had a nightmare quite that real ever before. Catherine and I were both in it. So was Paracelsus. I dreamt Paracelsus was a Druid priest and that he killed Catherine."

Shuddering again, he pulled her back against his side and kissed her brow. "Thank God it was only a nightmare! I do not think I could live without you," he said, remembering the anguish felt by the man-beast Estileon, as his great heart broke.

"Well it's over now. It was only a bad dream. Catherine is safe. Try and get some rest."

As Father reached the door on his way out he turned and vowed, "And Vincent, next year I will do the lesson on Samhain!"

END