

Every school has its secrets ...

**THE
SCHOOL BETWEEN
WINTER AND FAIRYLAND**

HEATHER FAWCETT

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★ WINTER AND FAIRYLAND ★

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1

IN WHICH AUTUMN MEETS AN UNUSUAL MAGICIAN

The dragon wasn't happy with the roses. No matter how Autumn cajoled and pleaded, Amfidzel refused to leave her garden, declaring that she wasn't going anywhere until she'd plucked all the aphids off the drooping stems.

Jack's round face was pale. "What do we do?"

Autumn tapped her foot, surveying the darkening sky. All monsters in Inglenook School's menagerie had to be stabled by sunset—that was the rule, and there'd be trouble if anyone found out that a dragon had been left to lurk the grounds after dark. Not that Amfidzel was particularly lurky, as dragons went. She'd huff and puff over the dying roses until she huffed and puffed herself out, then she'd fall asleep among the lady's slippers.

Like all dragons, Amfidzel was obsessed with flowers. She spent her days hovering over her honey-scented hoard, pruning and plucking and weeding.

Jack patted Amfidzel's flank. "Can't she stay out a little longer?"

"Oh, Jack." Autumn drew her softhearted brother out of range of Amfidzel's horns. Jack was forever making pets out of the monsters, giving them names and fussing over them when they were sick. When he was little, he used to put rain-coats on the Hounds of Arawn when he took them down the mountain for walks—as if they were real dogs, not ghostly, coal-eyed beasts that howled at impending death. It was a wonder Jack had made it to thirteen with all his limbs.

Autumn was tired. She'd spent all afternoon mucking out the stalls in the menagerie, and she didn't have any patience for dillydallying dragons. She drew a breath and spoke into Amfidzel's mind. *Do you want to get Gran in trouble?*

No, Amfidzel said sulkily. Autumn's grandmother was the menagerie's head beastkeeper, and had hand-raised most of the monsters, including Amfidzel herself. It wasn't entirely accurate to say that Gran was like a mother to Amfidzel, but she was certainly more mother than paid keeper.

Autumn decided to change tactics. *If you're good, I'll bring you a present tomorrow.*

Amfidzel's head lifted at that. She was a snowy dragon, white as milk but for a ridge of golden scales down her back. Snowy dragons were only about twenty feet from nose to tail when full-grown, but what they lacked in size they made up for and then some with their enormous antlers. The tips were poisoned: one scratch and you'd fall into a slumber from which not even the

mightiest magician could wake. Amfidzel, though, was only ten years old, or about five in dragon years, and almost sweet, if you looked past the antlers and shadowy red eyes.

What sort of present? The dragon's pointed face brightened. *Another rosebush?*

Autumn didn't have the heart to tell Amfidzel she didn't seem to have a green thumb where roses were concerned. Jack's eyes darted between them, his brow furrowed. He wasn't very good at the Speech—half the time, the monsters ignored him.

I'll talk to Miss Ewing down in the village, Autumn said. *She may have some lily seeds from beyond the Blue Mountains.*

Hmph. Amfidzel cast another mournful look at the roses and followed Autumn and Jack out of the garden. Autumn breathed a sigh of relief.

The dragon's garden was enclosed by three tumble-down stone walls that had probably been a farmer's house long, long ago, back when the Gentlewood had been only a shadow on the horizon. It was a small garden by dragon standards—two neat plots of vegetables, a strawberry patch, and a tangled bed of pansies and sweet violets. The oldest dragons had acres of fragrant flowers, vegetables, blooming shrubs for all seasons, and fruit trees. Amfidzel's mother had turned a slope in the Blue Mountains red with tulips and poppies, and laced the scree with creeping hibiscus and mounds of rhododendrons. Gran had seen it with her own eyes, for she was the one who had stolen Amfidzel for the menagerie when she was just an egg. Dragons protected

their gardens more ferociously than they did their children.

Autumn led Amfidzel up the muddy mountain path toward the menagerie. Above them, Inglenook School of Magic gleamed against the twilight. It was nestled into the southern face of Mythroor, the largest of the Taran Mountains, having been enchanted into existence from the stones of the mountains by magicians who knew nothing about architecture but wanted something impressive and grand. Inglenook *was* impressive, in a confusing sort of way: a huge pile of columns and turrets and towers and—unaccountably—a drawbridge (there was no moat); your eyes slid all over the school as if trying to work out an optical illusion.

Smoke puffed out of the turret above the banquet hall, where the windows glowed golden. Autumn wondered what sort of feast the magicians within were sitting down to—cabbage rolls and roast duck? Bacon and sweet potato pie? She shivered in the October air, her stomach knotting with a hunger that wasn't entirely for food.

Autumn had grown up in the shadow of Inglenook, in the little beastkeepers' cottage at the edge of the grounds. She knew it was silly to long for something she could never have—for a place at that banquet table, to be among those students as they swept from class to class in their long cloaks. She wasn't a magician. She was a servant, same as the rest of her family. She could gaze into the world of Inglenook, like gazing into a pond full of colorful fish, but she would never be part of it.

Autumn and Jack led Amfidzel into Inglenook's menagerie,

a large stone paddock with a floor heated by an underground spring. The flagstones had been soaked in seawater, which had a soothing effect on monsters—for the same reason that the sea had a soothing effect on people, Gran thought, but nobody really knew for sure.

Autumn put Amfidzel in her stall, which was roomy and lined with floral tapestries that the dragon had selected herself. The stall was next to the griffin and across from the wyverns, who were already asleep. Not all the school's monsters were housed in the menagerie—there were some that were simply too dangerous.

One in particular.

"Here you go," Autumn said, tipping vegetable scraps into Amfidzel's trough. "Gran will be in later to say good night."

"I guess I'll round up the wisps," Jack said sadly. Rounding up the wisps usually involved hitting the pesky things with a stick to stun them, then shoving them into a sack. Jack hated it.

Autumn sighed. Though Jack was her favorite older brother, he was unquestionably the worst beastkeeper. She should have asked Kyffin or even Emys for help—despite being the world's biggest pests, they could at least be counted on not to waste time coddling things that would sooner bite your arm off than thank you. Autumn often wondered what she had done to deserve the curse of three older brothers and not one sister, but then Gran often said that everyone had their burdens to bear in life.

I'm your brother too, Winter had always said whenever she complained.

You're all right, Autumn would respond. You're younger. Younger brothers are okay.

Ten minutes younger, he'd snort.

A person can gain a lot of wisdom in ten minutes.

Mud pies, too. A person can get a lot of those in ten minutes. And he'd scoop up a handful of mud and send it whizzing past her head as she ran away laughing.

At the other end of the menagerie, one of the Hounds of Arawn stirred in her stall, crooning hungrily as she tasted Autumn's sadness. Autumn forced her thoughts of Winter away. It was dangerous to be sad among monsters.

"I'll find the wisps," she told Jack. "You go help Emys with supper. It's his turn, and I'd rather not eat burned potatoes again."

Jack's face lit. He wrapped her in one of his warm hugs and kissed her cheek.

"Yuck," Autumn grumbled. "Go away."

Jack grinned and ran off in the direction of the cottage.

Autumn ghosted into the twilight. She could move as quietly as a pooka and as quickly as a crested dragon when she wanted to.

Part monster yourself, Gran had once told her proudly. The best beastkeepers usually are.

The wind was silken against her cheeks, still woven with a trace of summer. Autumn ran to the dark side of the mountain, which stretched its long shadow over the treetops. She found the wisps hovering at the edge of the forest, framed against the black boughs.

The forest that clothed the slopes below Inglenook was part of the Gentlewood, the great forest that surrounded the Kingdom of Eryree on two sides. Every year, the Gentlewood crept deeper and deeper into Eryree, no matter how often the king's soldiers burned it back. All forests got bigger if left to their own devices, but the Gentlewood's growth was fed by the magic of the creatures that made their homes there. The part that touched Inglenook's grounds was a long finger extending off the main sweep of the forest, less dangerous, but still home to a variety of monsters.

From a distance, the wisps looked like little orbs, but close up you could sometimes make out a hint of a grinning face or the flicker of wings. Autumn crept up behind them and pounced, walloping two with a stick and trapping them in her sackcloth net.

Cloud-headed dunce! one of the wisps shrieked at her. *I'll bite your toes off!*

Autumn swung her stick, which connected with a nice *ping*. The wisp went down.

The remaining wisps swarmed, hollering insults and threats. It was the only speech they were capable of—even in a good mood, all they did was jabber at each other. Wisps liked to lure travelers astray in the wilderness by mimicking the distant glow of a cozy hearth, but otherwise they weren't particularly dangerous—just annoying.

Cauliflower hair!

I'll poke your eye out, you duck-footed lummox!

One of the wisps got itself tangled in Autumn's hair, while another flew up the back of her cloak. After dancing about for a moment, giggling uncontrollably, she dropped to the ground and rolled. The wisp up her cloak let out a soft *merp* and stopped squirming, and she stuffed it into the net with the others. It felt like cupping dandelion seeds.

A peal of laughter rang through the shadows. Autumn froze.

Charging out of the forest, cloaks streaming behind them, were two boys. As they neared, Autumn saw that one of the boys was Gawain Gruffid, best friend of Cai Morrigan, the most famous magician in the kingdom. Cai was only twelve, like Autumn, but he was prophesied to one day slay the Hollow Dragon, the deadliest monster in the world. Cai had fought and killed a pooka when he was only ten years old—no one knew exactly how; each story was wilder than the last.

The other boy was Cai Morrigan himself.

Cai paused in the forest's shadow, gazing into the trees. His face in the moonlight was alive with longing.

Who looks at the Gentlewood like that? Autumn thought, neck prickling.

Cai backed away from the trees slowly, as if fighting a retreating wave. Gawain called him, and Cai ran to catch up.

Autumn started and shrank back, hoping to fade into the twilight. But there wasn't anything to hide behind, and the wisps glowed faintly through the sackcloth. The boys came to a halt.

"Who's there?" Cai called, trying to peer into her shadowed hood.

Autumn's heart thudded. She knew exactly who Cai Mor-rigan was—everybody in Eryree did—but she'd never been so close to him. She was suddenly very aware of her mud-stained cloak, her disheveled hair with a wisp tangled in it, and her handed-down work boots, which had a hole in the left toe.

Cai and Gawain, on the other hand, were resplendent in Inglenook cloaks that might have been cut from the twilight, glossy black with lavender trim. Gawain's tie was askew, and Cai's plaid scarf dragged in the grass, but otherwise they were the picture of two dashing magicians, who, once grown, would be treated as royalty wherever they went. Magicians were the protectors of Eryree, the only ones who could stop the advance of the Gentlewood and its monsters. Only the king and queen were more beloved.

Autumn realized she was staring at Cai and bowed deeply. "Sir" was all she could get out.

"It's just a beastkeeper," Gawain said, in the same way you'd say *It's just a mouse*.

Cai seemed relieved. Given how famous he was, he wasn't much to look at, with a lot of messy black hair that often hid his eyes and a delicate, heron-like frame. His light brown skin was covered in freckles that made him look younger than twelve. But his voice had a mellow, musical quality that somewhat made up for his unimpressive appearance.

Cai squinted at Autumn, taking in her white hair and gangly legs, the only parts of her that showed around her cloak. "You're Winter Malog, right? Could you pretend you didn't

see us? We're not supposed to be out after dark."

Autumn stared. Every thought flew out of her head, and it wasn't because the famous Cai Morrigan had asked her for help.

"That's not Winter," Gawain said. He had pale skin and beautiful dark curls that fell to his chin, while his gaze had a cool, hooded quality shared by all the wealthier students at Inglenook. "Winter's the dead one. That's his twin sister—I don't know her name."

Cai reddened. Autumn felt as if she'd swallowed something cold and slimy.

"You didn't see us," Gawain said to Autumn. "Got it?"

Autumn bowed her head. To her horror, her lip was shaking. She was not going to cry in front of Gawain. She was *not*.

Gawain stepped closer. "I said, *got it?*"

Autumn forced herself to breathe, forced herself to murmur, "Yes, sir."

"That wasn't so hard." Gawain turned to Cai. "I wish Inglenook would train its servants properly. Come on."

Cai's cheeks were flaming. He murmured something that might have been an apology, and then he was racing up the mountain after Gawain. He looked once over his shoulder, but Autumn didn't see. She was already gone, fleeing across the mountainside with her heart in her throat and furious tears stinging her eyes.



2

IN WHICH AUTUMN TAKES THE BOGGART FOR A WALK

Autumn had lived beside the Gentlewood for so long that she sometimes forgot it was full of monsters. Monsters of all shapes and sizes, and some with *several* shapes and sizes, or none. Not all the Gentlewood's monsters ate children—some ate sadness or fear; others had a taste for souls or hearts or toenails, especially when accompanied by a lot of screaming. But a few monsters had decidedly unmonstrous diets. Dragons ate berries, apples ripe from the tree, and vegetables they grew in their gardens. Amfidzel was particularly fond of her carrots, which grew fat and luxuriously orange, and would devour them, greens and all, with much gnashing and snorting only once they had reached—in her expert opinion—the perfect ripeness.

The morning after Autumn's disastrous encounter with Cai Morrigan, the entire school was buzzing with the rumor that he had snuck into the forest and fought the Hollow Dragon.

“He’s all torn up, they say,” Ceredwen said, her green eyes wide. Like her parents, Ceredwen was a housekeeper and heard all the best gossip. “Got a scar from here”—she touched her navel—“to *here*.” She tapped her forehead.

Autumn hadn’t seen any evidence of terrible wounds last night, but she wasn’t about to tell Ceredwen that. “What was he doing wandering into the forest and getting himself cut in half?” she said crossly.

She was in one of the spare paddocks with Gran and the others, replacing rotten fence posts. The paddock lay at the foot of Mythroor, where the shade lingered most of the day, stubborn and clammy, a match for Autumn’s mood.

“Dunno,” Ceredwen said, chewing on one of her blond braids. Ceredwen’s hair was long and luscious, despite how she was always gnawing on it. “Maybe he wanted to fulfill the prophecy.”

“I’d like to see that.” The idea of the skinny, red-faced boy she’d met last night lasting five seconds against the Hollow Dragon was laughable. The Hollow Dragon had burned whole villages to the ground and destroyed half the king’s army in a single afternoon. He’d killed ten different magicians and countless knights who’d tried to defeat him. He was the most fearsome monster anyone in Eryree had ever known. And Cai Morrigan was going to stop him?

Autumn snorted.

Her feelings toward Cai hadn’t warmed overnight. Even if

it was Gawain who'd been horrible, all Cai had done was stand there like a dolt. And that was the boy the masters at Inglenook doted on, the boy who would never have to work for anything in his life! All because some seer had made a prophecy about him back when he was a drooly baby. Autumn slammed her hammer into the fence post with another snort.

"Do you have a cold?" Ceredwen asked.

"Does your ma know you're down here, Ceri?" Gran said, squelching up behind them. Gran was stout and broad-shouldered, her hair black but for a big white stripe down the side. She was large enough to wrestle a wyvern into submission, and had more than once, and her clothes were so often caked in mud they had turned brownish, while her boots were steel-toed and went up to the thigh. With her beaky nose and fixed glare from squinting into sun and rain and hail, she looked like an old raven who had stalked out of the woods to pick a fight. And as you did with old ravens, most people stayed out of her way.

Ceredwen looked shifty. "I—"

"Didn't think so," Gran said. "You'll catch your death in that sweater. Away with you."

She said it in the same voice she used with the monsters, and it produced a similar effect—Ceredwen went quiet and hurried off, pausing only to give Autumn a wave and put the braid back in her mouth.

"Why don't you ever worry about us catching our deaths,

Gran?” Autumn said, hammering at the post.

“Good grief!” Gran let out a gusty breath. “You think I’d worry myself about having one less munchkin to mind, at my age? Leave it to those parents of yours to run off when you were a babe and get themselves killed by a sea dragon, saddling me with you lot. More work than a wyvern with a toothache, you are, but then your father weren’t never nothing but trouble in life, so why should he be any different when he’s dead? Ach, child, give over that hammer—you’ll put your eye out.”

Autumn brushed her hair back from her sweaty brow. “Gran, can I take the boggart hunting? Master Erethor is showing him to the senior apprentices tomorrow, and he’ll be more likely to cooperate if he’s eaten something.”

Gran gave her a sharp look. “That thing fancies you too much, child. You’d be foolish to return the favor.”

Autumn sighed. Gran gave her the same warning every other week. There was nothing Gran could do about Autumn’s friendship with the boggart, though—nobody could order boggarts around, not even Gran. Whenever she tried to separate them, the boggart just ignored her and followed Autumn around even more out of spite.

“Please, Gran?” Autumn said. “It’s not fair that Emys and Kyffin get all the fun jobs. You *never* let me do anything important. Why can’t—”

“There’s no need to yell.”

Autumn sighed again. She heard that a lot, along with *Hush now* and *Pipe down, Autumn*, and, her personal favorite, *Button*

it, as if she were an untidy cloak flapping in the wind. She often tried to be quieter, but what was the point? Nobody ever explained it.

"You can go," Gran said. "If you take Emys or Kyffin with you."

Autumn grumbled—quietly.

"What was that?" Gran fixed her with a beaky glare.

"Nothing, Gran."

"Not giving me attitude, are you?"

"No, Gran. Never."

"That's what I thought." Gran drove the post into the mud in two ferocious strokes.

Autumn headed toward her brothers, who were sawing new posts at the other end of the fence, but before they spotted her, she veered left along the ridge. She had no intention of asking for help, particularly from Emys, her eldest and least favorite brother. She had important business in the forest, and she didn't want any brothers getting in the way.

Ever since Winter disappeared nearly a year ago, Autumn's mission had been to work out what had happened to him. Winter would never have given up on her, and she would never give up on him. Never.

She reached the boggart's pen and peeked through a window. The boggart lived in the old beastkeepers' hut, which hadn't been used in a hundred years. It was only one room of crumbling stone, and it wasn't really a pen at all—they just called it that to make the youngest apprentices feel better.

The boggart could leave whenever he liked, though he seldom went far.

Boggarts were the oldest and most powerful monsters in the world, so powerful that nobody knew the extent of their magic. They delighted in this, for they loved above all else to be mysterious. What *was* known was that boggarts could take any shape they liked, from the smallest fly to the wickedest monster—they had no bodies of their own to constrain them. Having no bodies, they were unkillable, as well as impossible to fight; no enchantment known to magicians had ever worked on a boggart. Unusual among monsters, boggarts were home-bodies with a bottomless love for company, and would attach themselves to a family whether the family liked it or not. The boggart wasn't really part of the menagerie; he belonged to the Malogs, but especially to Autumn.

The boggart rose from a patch of sunlight, stretching. He wore one of his favorite shapes, a resplendently plump black cat.

Where have you been? I haven't seen you in— He stopped. The boggart had a terrible sense of time. *Ages. Ages and ages.*

"It was yesterday," Autumn said. She didn't have to use the Speech with the boggart, as boggarts spent so much time around people that they learned their languages—not that they always listened. "I have to go into the forest again. Do you want to come?"

Okay. The boggart minced over to the window. The floor of the hut was strewn with coins and trinkets—boggarts hoarded

anything shiny. *But your brother's heading this way. The worst one.*

Autumn groaned. Sure enough, there came Emys, striding down the leaf-painted mountain. Bounding alongside him was their dog, Choo, also known as the least magical dog in the world. Choo was named for his habit of sneezing whenever there was a monster near, but also sometimes when there wasn't, which was bad for the nerves. He was large and yellow and fluffy, and his good looks had blessed him with a sense of entitlement to affection from the world at large. This was handy in a dog who spent most of his time around monsters. Choo was fearless—not because he was brave, but because he had no enemies to be brave about.

Autumn rubbed his ears, and Choo gazed at her with his eternally blissful expression.

“Where do you think you’re going with that thing?” Emys demanded, his long, narrow face red from the cold. “Gran said—”

“Gran said I could take the boggart for a walk,” Autumn said. Choo sneezed all over the boggart, who responded with a hiss. Choo interpreted this as a request to nuzzle.

“Yes, if I looked after you,” Emys said with a dark look. “Come on.”

Autumn picked up the boggart and fell into step behind Emys. “Don’t you have some important mooning around to do?”

Emys just cast another dark look over his shoulder. He’d fallen for one of the students, a quiet, sullen-faced girl, sixteen

like him, and they were always sneaking off together. It would be a scandal if anyone found out, as beastkeepers were among the lower ranks of Inglenook servants.

They slipped beneath the boughs of the forest, and the air went damp and chill. A little path parted the oaks, and they followed it as far as a clearing bright with foxgloves. Two more paths led off the clearing—the Briar Path, laid by magicians long ago, and the Unpath, made by wisps or bogles or worse. The Unpath led deep, deep into the forest, its course so rough and winding that few travelers found their way out again.

Unless they had a guide.

“You can hunt if you like,” Autumn told the boggart. “But first, lead me to the creek.”

Emys glared. “What are you doing?”

The boggart didn’t need to be told twice. He melted into a golden nightingale and flitted through the trees along the Unpath with a lilting song.

“This is about Winter, isn’t it?” Emys said. “If you’ve hatched another harebrained scheme to—”

“I only have one scheme,” Autumn said. “And that’s finding out what happened to him. You can go back if you like. But the boggart and I aren’t going with you.”

Emys glowered. It had been several years since he’d shoved Autumn into a mud puddle or dangled her upside down over a dragonpat, but he still had a bit of a bully inside him. And like all bullies, he backed down fast when he came up against

someone stronger. Autumn knew he was as scared of the boggart as the students were.

“All right,” he said finally. “But Gran’s going to hear about this.”

“You’re my least favorite brother,” Autumn said, and they set off after the boggart.

The path wound around a cleft rowan that Autumn didn’t remember, which meant the Unpath had changed, as it often did. She soon lost all sense of direction. Emys’s hand went to the dagger at his belt, his eyes darting every which way. Choo bounded up and down the path, for he wasn’t lost in a dark forest filled with terrifying monsters, but on a happy adventure with two of his favorite people in a place with lots of interesting smells.

The boggart flickered through the trees, and Emys and Autumn followed, making a terrible noise as they crashed through the undergrowth. Being fearful of magicians, monsters didn’t often stray into the parts of the forest that encroached on Inglenook’s grounds, but that didn’t mean they *never* did. She wished Emys wasn’t such an oaf.

Autumn was scared. She was scared every time she went into the Gentlewood, but it was a good kind of scared. She knew she shouldn’t, but she loved that old forest. She loved the bluebells that drowned the forest floor, the hovering wisps that set the trees aglow at night. She loved when the morning draped cobwebs of fog over the trees, how the boughs creaked

and groaned like a deliciously haunted house.

Autumn's foot stuck in a bit of bogland. She and Emys bickered about which way to go—Emys was for looking for a way around the muck, while Autumn wanted to plow through. In the end, she ignored him and stormed ahead, boots squelching and slurping dreadfully in the ooze. On the other side of the bog, they found a perfectly dry pathway of raised ground only a few yards away.

“Good grief,” Emys said, flicking mud from his cloak. “You have to do everything in the loudest, most obnoxious way possible, don’t you? No wonder that boggart takes such a shine to you.”

“You’re one to talk about loud. Like a dragon trying to walk on its hind legs, you are.”

They came to a cluster of hills where the forest thinned, filled with little clearings crowded with rosebay. Autumn and Emys wove their way between crumbling walls shrouded in moss. Her heart quickened, and even Emys trod more carefully. This had once been the village of Beddle, abandoned a century ago after a dragon attack. Every year, at least one of Eryree’s villages was swallowed by the great forest as it continued its steady southward advance. Things had gotten worse, far worse, over the past two decades, since the Hollow Dragon had come down from the north.

A few more minutes brought them to the creek. It wound through a lacework of ferns and ivy, dark and quiet, as if it, too,

was fearful of discovery.

Can I hunt now? the boggart asked. Boggarts didn't die without food, but they grew sluggish and more bad-tempered than usual.

Yes, Autumn said. Eat and come back quickly.

Don't worry, the boggart said. *There's nobody near, man or beast.* He alighted on the ground and became a griffin with a lashing tail and a mane like a waterfall. Emys smothered a yelp, and the griffin snorted with pleasure and charged into the underbrush with an eerie grace and barely a rustle of leaves. Choo charged after him and was delighted when the boggart vanished like smoke, for didn't such surprises make every game more fun? He trotted back to Autumn and accepted the ear rubs that were his due.

"What exactly are you hoping to find?" Emys asked.

"I'm not *hoping*. I'm investigating."

When Winter disappeared, everyone had assumed it was the Hollow Dragon's doing. They'd found one of Winter's boots in the Gentlewood, burned black and still smoking. It wasn't the first time the Hollow Dragon had taken a child from Inglenook. The magicians all shook their heads—it was too bad about the boy, they said, but beastkeepers died all the time; dangerous line of work, very dangerous—and carried on with things. Even Gran had believed it.

But Autumn never would.

Ever since Autumn could remember, she and Winter had

been able to sense one another. It was as if she carried around a map in her head that showed Winter as a little glowing dot. If someone asked where he was, she had only to open the map inside her, and she would know. When he vanished, the dot hadn't disappeared. The map had, leaving the dot behind. Winter was still there, still *somewhere*, but for some reason, Autumn couldn't find him.

Nobody believed her, and she couldn't really blame them. It sounded far-fetched even to her. So, rather than trying to convince anyone, she set about gathering evidence.

First, she went to the place where the magicians had found the boot and examined the scorches on the forest floor. The Hollow Dragon was surprisingly dainty when it came to fire-breathing—only a patch of grass had been burned. But did that mean anything? She didn't know.

So Autumn started asking the trees.

The Gentlewood was ancient—it had existed before Eryree was Eryree, before the Southern Realms were the Southern Realms. And some of its trees weren't trees at all, but monsters that had fallen asleep in its deep shade, and dreamed there still. Autumn had first woken a misshapen alder that had once been a dragon. It had taken her weeks to do it, visiting whenever she could escape Gran's notice and shouting into the dragon's mind until the bark that had grown over its skin twitched and trembled. While the beast didn't remember much, it was sure it had smelled a solitary

boy heading toward the creek on the day Winter vanished.

And so Autumn had gone to the creek, and there she had found a monster that looked like a log but was in fact an ancient ogre beneath a blanket of moss. The ogre hadn't been happy about being disturbed, and if the boggart hadn't been with Autumn, she might have been in real danger. But after much grumbling, the ogre said she remembered seeing a white-haired boy pass that way, and possibly a dragon too. They had been traveling north, along the streambank toward the Gentlewood proper. She knew no more than that.

Then, a few months after Winter vanished, one of the masters had made a strange discovery: she had found Winter's other boot.

Inside the school.

It had been lying in one of the disused passageways, Winter's initials etched plain as day into the sole. Had Winter abandoned the boot and marched into the forest in his sock to be abducted by the Hollow Dragon? If so, why hadn't anyone seen him? Had someone found the boot in the forest and brought it inside? Why?

None of it made sense.

Autumn picked her way along the streambank, over rocks slick with algae and melting leaves, Choo at her heels. There weren't many wisps floating about in the moody forest daylight—they usually slept until nightfall. She passed the sleeping ogre and continued north. She hadn't found another

monster to awaken, though she'd been looking for weeks.

She paused next to a snag and rested her hand against the rough bark, listening. Listening, and trying not to let the disappointment well inside her—after all, she'd only just started. But each time she had gone looking for Winter, she'd found nothing, and it was hard not to think that this day would turn out just like the others.

She would never give up on him, but each day that passed made the hope she carried a little heavier to bear, with more sharp edges of sadness.

"What *are* you doing?" Emys's hand was still on his dagger.

"I'm listening for a heartbeat."

Emys stared at her, slack-jawed. "In a tree?"

"They aren't all trees. Some were monsters once. You know that—you've heard Gran's stories."

Emys took a rapid step backward, bumped into a tree, and skipped sideways. "Y-yes."

Autumn kept going. A Hound of Arawn howled in the distance, and Autumn tried not to imagine its burning eyes looming out of the shadows. The forest grew darker the deeper you went into the Gentlewood, thick boughs knitting together overhead, but the undergrowth was less, and Autumn and Emys moved swiftly. Autumn wondered how much time she had before Gran got suspicious and came looking for them. Gran didn't need a boggart for protection when she went into the woods—she could command most monsters with a thought.

Choo stopped, his front half low to the ground as he sniffed at a stump. “Choo,” Autumn called, but the dog only wagged his tail. “Choo!”

“Keep your voice down,” Emys snapped.

Autumn waded through the bluebells and crouched at Choo’s side. Something was buried among the roots and fallen leaves—a blanket, maybe, or clothes? She had walked past this spot a dozen times, yet had never noticed it.

Choo whined. Autumn reached under the roots, pushing through red toadstools that released a sweet-smelling mist as they broke, and hooked her fingers around the cloth.

It was bigger than she had guessed, buried under a layer of old forest, and came loose with a shower of leaves. It was soil-stained and smelled of mold and mushrooms.

“Autumn?” Emys called.

Autumn didn’t answer. She fumbled for the collar, even though she knew what she held, knew before she laid eyes on the clumsily stitched *W.M.*

It was Winter’s cloak.

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