

# Samhain Night

*by Celestial Melody*

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Written for the Full Moon One-Shot Challenge on MNFF.

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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Hate to say it, but I have *not* had this beta-ed. I hope that is all right. =/

Romanian Words Used

*Fluture* butterflies

*parfum*- perfume

*puđră* powder

*Mamă* mother

*a umbla* wand

*Cadou* - gift

## Samhain Night

Layne lay quietly in the homespun warmth of her oak-frame bed; she moved not a muscle. Softly, an owl hooted outside, and Layne pushed back the patchwork quilt, exposing a fully clothed petite frame. Shaking her head dreamily to clear the cobwebs of residual sleep, Layne listened intently until, from the world beyond, the trilling gurgle of a nightingale joined the silent ringing of the owl's hoot. Within seconds, she'd leapt from the bed and stood, poised on the balls of finely boned feet, her small, freckled hands splayed out to steady herself in the vertigo of her dark bedroom. Her red-gold hair frizzed wildly in the softly glowing beams of the harvest moon and danced tremulously, teased by the playful fingertips of the autumn wind.

More urgently, another owl hoot echoed from outside and the nightingale sang louder; a playful glint lighting her cloudy hazel eyes, Layne slowly, carefully crossed the room and peered sightlessly out the window, her hands gripping the sash. She couldn't see them, but she knew that there, on the sage-covered lawn, stood a group of ragged people, golden bells glinting off their bodies. One of the shadowy figures raised a hand and waved, but its arm was quickly pulled down by one of the other tattered people who sibilantly whispered a fierce rebuke. A tiny laugh threatened to bubble from Layne's chest, for she had heard the nervousness behind the facade of ferocity in that whisper, but she instead placed a shadowy finger to her lips and nodded once.

Obviously a signal, Layne's acquiescent nod set the ragged people in motion; with rhythmic, bell-tinkling steps, the group advanced toward the first-floor window, the white fog of their breath hanging in the cold stillness of the night air.

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Layne had never seen these tatterdemalions, would *never* see them, but their deft footsteps and the burned wood scent that lingered in their clothing, their coal black hair, even their dusky skin, allowed her to know them in an intimate way unimagined by the rest of the "seeing" world. Thus, she was not frightened by the gypsies' sudden appearance, was not bemused by their swift and silent approach, for one born without sight often experiences that peculiar honing of the other senses that disability can bring. And so it was with Layne: she could hear a sparrow alight on a twig; she could smell the spicy mince pies baking at Christmas in the little town of Gregory-on-the-Green three miles away; she felt the scratch of wool, the saliva-sweet caress of cat fur and tasted the succulent sweetness of plums, the sour glory of jarred pickles more keenly than did her family.

But because of her blindness, Layne was not allowed to go to school; her fond but overprotective family feared the reaction of their neighbors, so they kept her closeted away in Gourdvale Cottage, far from the prying, undamaged eyes of the town. Her family's anxious ways did not distress Layne, for when children her age were diligently doddering off to primary school, wistfully eying the last of the merry, yellow cowslips growing rampant beside the gravel paths, Layne was wandering freely about her lawn, delicately stroking the silky petals of English roses and cowslips, and holding up Lady Constance, her tabby, to kiss the cat's disdainful pink nose.

It was a little odd when Craig and Siobhan went off to the school in town. Autumn mornings, misty grey and filled with the wholesome, earthy smells of bubbling oatmeal, lost their appeal, and Layne found herself wishing she was allowed to attend Pope Gregory's Primary, too. But whenever she tentatively mentioned this exciting...though admittedly ludicrous...possibility to her mother, that worthy woman's deathly silence conveyed such an ineffable degree of horror, Layne never mentioned her idea again.

Resigned to the knowledge that her schooling would *always* consist of oral lessons given her by the quiet, studious head of the McCraery family, and integrally accustomed to a solitary lifestyle, Layne found other interests to pursue. In particular, she had a passionate love and adoration of the forested, herb-rich countryside that surrounded Gregory-on-the-Green, and spent hours wandering through the woods near her home, guided first by her careful brother and sister, and then by touch and smell. She would never see the crystal blue of the babbling brook that ran behind Gourdvale Cottage, but she grew to know its friendly voice, just as she taught herself that the Armenian lamb's ear growing in her own, private little garden felt soft and tender to the touch, unlike the prickly sweet marjoram that ran mischievously down the brook's sloping bank.

As Layne grew older, and Mr. and Mrs. McCraery found that she was quite able to be alone without getting lost or hurt, her herb-gathering sojourns increased in number and length of time as she roamed the wild woods, searching for the most aromatic or medicinal herbs for her garden. So it was that one golden, lazy day in late August when the sheaves of wheat are at their finest, their most luxurious, and nearly ripe for the harvest, Layne found herself in the thickest part of the woods, a kerchief covering her red-gold hair, a wicker basket in her small hand, searching for the thyme her mother needed for cooking. Following her nose, Layne reached a gently-rising hill upon which flowered thyme and, pulling a pair of scissors from the pocket of her linen apron, was beginning to cut off some fragrant sprigs when the snap of a brittle oak twig behind her caused her to freeze, the basket falling from one hand and tumbling down the slope, while the other hand, hidden in the folds of her skirt, clutched the scissors tightly.

The quick, shallow breaths coming from across the clearing announced the arrival of *...someone*, and peering sightlessly into the distance, Layne desperately tried to fathom who was intruding into the once-upon-a-time privacy of her little thicket. "Who is it?" she called, her soft voice wobbling a very little as a faint amount of cold, metallic fear seeped into the warmth of the summer day.

There was no reply, only a woodsmoke smell and the melodic clinking of tiny bells as a sweep of cool wind, foretelling a swiftly approaching autumn, gusted through the clearing. Steeling herself, Layne tightened her sweaty, clenched grip on the scissors and, carefully making her way down the gentle slope with small, hesitant steps, moved toward the sound of the bells. From the other side of the thicket came a sharp gasp, causing Layne to pause in animal-like awareness, but still there was no reply to her question, and she moved on, shuffling her feet lightly against the uneven ground and stirring the leaves below.

"Ach! No, wait!" a young, feminine voice cried out in heavily accented English.

Layne stopped and stiffened, for the smoky scent, the merry bells, the foreign-sounding voice, could only mean one thing: this intruder was of the Romani people, a group of gypsies her mother and father denounced as magic-loving witches, wizards, and devil-worshippers. They said that the gypsies moved from town to town, putting on colorful, lewd displays and cheating honest, hard-working people out of their money through immoral schemes of fortune-telling and crystal ball-reading. They said that the gypsies were lazy and did nothing but dance and sing all day; normal people didn't do that.

Frankly, it had all sounded quite thrilling to Layne, but her parents' acidic distaste of the gypsies curtailed her curiosity ... at least on the outside. But within, she still marveled and mused over the mysterious people and longed to meet them. Surely her somewhat lonely life must be charmed, for, miraculously, here one was ... in *her* woods.

Inconspicuously, then, for swift movements often cause a gentle creature to bolt, Layne slipped the scissors into the pocket of her apron. Stepping forward, she reached out a hand, palm upward, in an open, intuitive gesture of innocence and friendship. "Why are you in my woods?" she asked.

The gypsy's bell-strung skirt continued to dance and sing boisterously in the wind, but the girl herself remained silent. Layne, however, merely waited; she was not impatient, for she knew that the girl must speak eventually. People always did, if you waited long enough. The late afternoon sun beamed warmly down on the two girls facing each other, and Layne felt the soft wings of a butterfly brush her cheek as it came to a rest on her long, sun-dusted nose. The butterfly's odd, impromptu landing broke the girls' silence, and both burst out laughing at the audacity of the dainty insect. Annoyed, the butterfly launched itself from Layne's nose, leaving behind a light dusting of sandy powder and a pungent odor, which Layne waved hastily away, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

"You are a good person," the gypsy murmured in the rich vibrancy of her sing-song English. "*Fluture* are careful about those they grace with their *parfum pudrã*."

"Their *what?*" Layne asked curiously, peering intently in the direction of the gypsy's intriguing voice.

Crunching dry summer grass, oak twigs, and leaves beneath bare feet, the gypsy girl moved closer. "The smell," she replied, the volume of her voice increasing the tiniest bit as she leaned toward Layne, "and the dust."

Just then, Layne felt a tentative fingertip brush her nose, and the smoky scent that lingered around the gypsy girl grew stronger. After resting for a moment on the tip of Layne's long nose, the girl's finger drew back, and Layne heard the pop of a stopper being pulled from a vial. Confused and curious, Layne cocked her head to one side.

"What did you just do?"

The honeyed warmth of a smile in her voice, the gypsy replied, "The *puđrā* is magic; I put it away for later."

"Oh," Layne breathed, for at the word 'magic,' the last bit of doubt within her had vanished; the rumors were true! The gypsies really *were* magical. Hazel eyes twinkling nonetheless for their blindness, Layne grasped clumsily around for the gypsy's hand and found an answering palm, glowing with friendly warmth. "I'm Layne," she said.

"I'm Cătălina," the gypsy replied, pressing Layne's bony hand with callused, comforting fingertips. "You dropped your basket, you know."

Layne felt a hot, red blush stain her freckled cheeks and quickly she dropped Cătălina's hand. "Yes," she muttered. "I ... I can't see." For the first time, Layne felt shame about her blindness, for she had never had any friends other than her brother and sister, and they loved her unconditionally as siblings must. At this embarrassed revelation, however, silence greeted her, although Layne could tell that Cătălina was still there by the gentle breeze of exhaled breath she felt on her face. Layne bit her lip and remained silent as, with a crackle of leaves and twigs, Cătălina slipped past Layne and walked musically toward the thyme-covered hill. Layne turned around, arms hanging listlessly by her sides, and followed the fascinating, little gypsy with her ears; she waited, and said not a word.

But in less than a minute, Cătălina was back, pressing the handle of the wicker basket into Layne's hand. "There," she said, the harmonious bloom of kindness, not the stinging slap of revulsion, gracing her low voice as she linked her arm through Layne's and pulled her gently from the clearing into the woods.

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From that moment on, Layne and Cătălina were almost inseparable. Whenever they could not meet each other in the thyme thicket hidden deep in the woods, Layne felt an emptiness that stemmed from every human being's need for friendly companionship. Her parents loved her, but they were ashamed of her blindness, and Craig and Siobhan had their own friends in town. But with Cătălina, Layne never felt unequal or lower than those around her, and it wasn't long before Cătălina had taken Layne to meet her multitudinous family who, at the moment, lived in parade of bell-laden wagons deep within the secretive darkness of the woods.

It was here that Layne learned of the ancient Romani magic; the fabled magic that had inspired fear, hatred, and distrust in people like her parents. The Rom (for that was how they referred to themselves) called it the *Cadou*, and not all had it, but those that did were considered among the wisest in the Romani camp. Cătălina had the *Cadou*, and she carried a slender wand of birch wood with her at all times; she even let Layne hold it, let her run her slender fingers up and down the smooth length, and Layne felt the pulsing of ancient magic within the wood's veins. But, to her dismay, that was all Layne could do with the wand; she was unable to conjure fire, unable to transfigure shoes and cooking pans the way that Cătălina could.

"It's not that you mightn't have the *Cadou*," Cătălina revealed to Layne after she caught Layne with tears flooding her clouded, hazel eyes after a botched attempt at transfiguring an old scarf. "It's that you are so young. But, Layne," she said, embracing Layne warmly, "you can *feel* the magic in my *umbra*; it may be that you have the *Cadou*, too."

Layne, although she was elated, thrilled, exhilarated to discover that one day *she*, a blind girl, might learn the magic that Cătălina knew, was careful to keep her new friends hidden from her parents. They would never understand why she loved the Rom. With the Viaḃā clan, Layne was a different person than the close-minded inhabitants of Gregory-on-the-Green and Gourdvale Cottage knew: she laughed brightly, sang lustily, and danced wildly, for the Rom were careful to keep her eager, slender feet away from the bonfires as they whirled her around the camp to the colorful, frenzied accompaniment of brisk tambourine, twangy guitar, and sparkling bell.

As the months passed, Layne's love of herbs became known to the Rom, who gathered around her and muttered appreciatively, pressing linen-wrapped packages of herbs into her hands. To them, herbs were Mother Nature's gift to the human race, and to refuse a gift is a cruel and unforgivable slight. Her knowledge of the universe and its intricacies expanded, too, as *Mamā* Ilinca, the matriarch of the Viaḃā clan and graced with the *Cadou* herself, took the small, blind child under her wing, teaching her the ancient lore of the Rom and whispering in her ear legends of the forming of the natural world.

"Samhain Night," *Mamā* Ilinca told Layne on a fiery-orange autumn day, a day when the leaves of the trees took flight, forsaking their bonds and twisting mad somersaults in the glory of the cool zephyrs, "is the most important night of the year for the Rom and for all people, though they may not know it, for it is *then* that the souls of our beloved return to the Earth for one day. And we dance under the light of the full moon; we build bonfires to light our ancestors' way back home."

Layne shivered. "But they are *dead*," she said, spiders skittering up her spine. "Shouldn't we cry for them because we miss them so much?"

*Mamā* Ilinca placed two warm, dusky, weather-worn hands on Layne's cheeks and replied, "No, child, for they have gone on to a better place. We dance for them ... in *honor* of them."

Then Layne had lost her fear and grown to accept Samhain Night's importance. She began to think of her own ancestors, and even managed to pluck up enough courage to ask her somber father about the Grandmother and Grandfather McCraery she had never known. When she was told that they had died painfully of influenza many long and weary years ago, she built a small, plain altar to them in the woods and, each day, would light a tallow candle for them. She always blew the candle flame out after a few minutes because candles don't last forever, and her mother's forehead had already gained a new wrinkle when she could not figure out why the candles kept disappearing from the storeroom. And yet Layne never told her mother nor her father exactly *what* she did in the woods because she was sure they would disapprove and forbid her to see the Rom ever again.

The secrecy needed on this Samhain Night was necessary to Layne, then, and her gypsy friends knew it. When the Viaḃā clan, their dark hair blowing in the moonlit night, reached her window, Layne allowed herself to be levitated out of the open window and into the cold world beyond without a murmur. No words were to be spoken on this night, nothing, but the occasional, quiet incantation.

Surrounded by the tattered warmth of her second, her true, family, Layne felt herself guided through the golden glow of moonlight into the cloistered secrecy of the forest. Someone grasped her waist and placed her on a broomstick; she knew it as such, for the hard length of wood beneath her fingertips was smooth from constant use. Her guardian...she was almost *sure* it was *Mamā* Ilinca...settled onto the broom behind her and kicked off the ground. Within moments, they and the rest of the clan, some guiding broomsticks, others riding tandem, were soaring through the chill of the autumn sky, their cloaks whipping furiously around them as the bells strung in their hair and through their clothing tinkled joyously in the sanctuary of night.

Although she could not see a thing, Layne opened her eyes as wide as could be, trying to take in the beauty of nature that sailed past her. If she concentrated hard enough, she could *almost* see a faint, golden glow and she knew that, *yes*, that must be the moon. In the rush of wind, she heard the whispers of her ancestors...of the *world's* ancestors...as they came back to Earth for just one night. Two of the voices...a kind, old man, a motherly, elderly woman...comforted her, embraced her, touched her sightless eyes with cold, windy fingertips, and as the tears...brought forth by raw emotion as much as by the whip of the cold air...started to flow down her cheeks, the shadowy veil of blindness lifted momentarily from her eyes, and Layne saw a man and a woman, shadowy hands linked together, and they smiled and it was with Layne's mouth and Layne's eyes. And just before the curtain fell once more, the old woman blew her a kiss, and the man smiled and held out his hand, and there in his palm lay a wand.