

EXCERPT OF

# INTO THE FORGOTTEN FOREST

BY RIVER J. HOPKINS

DOO

## 1 A DOOR IN THE AIR

PRESENT DAY, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS  
THE TALL MAN

It was a New England summer night like any other, almost unremarkable in every way. Almost. The sun was going down, and a tall man stood in the shadow of a tree. He watched as silhouettes moved around inside the condo across the way. Taking a long drag on his cigarette, he exhaled before having a sip of his coffee. As he surveilled the family through the windows—stacking boxes for their move the next morning—a thin man stepped out of the air a few feet away out of some kind of invisible door. Or perhaps he simply appeared when and where he wanted. The thin man took several long strides in quick succession to the tall man's side. None of this frightened or surprised him in the least. Without turning, he said, "It's been a while, magic man."

The Wizard smiled. "Yes, my friend, it has. Almost eighteen years now, if I have the correct Time." He adjusted his skinny, blue tie. Then he rolled his sleeves up past his elbows and straightened his gray waistcoat. "I can't stand modern fashions. They're more constricting than a set of armor."

The magic man may have appeared young, but he was far, far from it. He ran a hand through his floppy, brown hair. And about a day's worth of stubble graced his angular face. The tall man suspected he'd merely forgotten to shave. Once, he'd shown up with only half his mustache trimmed. Of course, he fixed this with a simple spell or enchantment or whatever the Arcane did with their magics. They had so many names for things. Keeping track was often difficult.

The tall man was older than he appeared, as well, but not quite as old as his mysterious, magical friend. "You'll get used to it," he replied. After taking one last drag, he flicked his cigarette butt into the street. The sparks from the ember swirled in the air a moment before disappearing down a drain. He looked down at his scarred, russet hands and shoved them in his pockets. As if not seeing them would make him forget how they got that way. "Their time has almost come."

"You know you can't see them before that night, right? Why are you here now when you know *she's* on your trail?" The Wizard looked concerned. He pulled a pipe—already packed and lit—out from the air above his head and puffed away.

"I'll be on my way shortly, magic man. Don't worry about me."

“Very well, old friend. I must prepare. Things are in motion, even now, that we hadn’t foreseen. I’ve sent for the Morrigan already. Although, I’m not entirely sure what she’s calling herself these days.”

He nodded to the Wizard. “I understand. We’ll meet again.” As soon as he spoke the words, his ancient friend was gone. Vanished back through the invisible doorway. The tall man sighed, and a face appeared in the window he’d been watching. He ducked into the shadows and jogged back toward his patchwork car. Getting in, he took one more glance behind him. “Everything will reveal itself in time,” he muttered to himself, “No point in worrying what’s next.” He turned the engine on and drank the rest of his coffee in several long gulps. The ride back home was going to be a long one.

*SAME TIME, SAME PLACE*

*OLI*

Olexa Locklear stood by the window in her bedroom. Late night traffic zoomed by on the streets of Boston. And she had the strangest notion she was being watched. She shook her head and brushed it off, then turned around to look at all the boxes, packed and stacked. Now that the room was all put away, and the walls were barren, it looked a lot bigger than before. Kind of sad, but also kind of not.

A knock sounded at her door, and her twin brother Olexander walked in. “Ready for our voyage tom-orrow?” He plopped down in her computer chair and swiveled in a circle with a broad grin on his tan face.

She saluted him. “Aye aye, Captain. Here we go again. Our lives, packed up in boxes.” As she let her long, wavy, black hair down from a ponytail, she pushed her glasses up her nose. Underneath the lenses, she wore smoky eyeliner, making her emerald green eyes pop.

“Agreed.” Xander spun around in the chair and adjusted his own glasses. His eyes were makeup-free but equally as stunning. Otherworldly, even.

They’d lived their entire lives bouncing from city to city. City streets, city people, city noise. Birch Hollow was way out in the boonies. The only thing Oli worried about was going to a public school for their senior year. But change is good. At least, that’s what she was trying to tell herself.

As far back as she could remember, they’d never stayed anywhere longer than a few months. Some of the time, they were even home-schooled. She was fluent in several languages, a black belt in karate, and an excellent runner. While her twin was an artist, she was a photographer. Their mum even gave her permission build an oldschool darkroom in the basement of the new house if she wanted to.

Finally, a house to call home. No more apartment or condo living. Though, the why and how wasn’t so great. Her Great Uncle Liam passed away and left them the house. Took a lot of convincing for their mother not to sell. She said they could try out living there for one year. What could it hurt? If they didn’t like it, they could be off to London or Tokyo or Dubai or New York City, where there were always crowds and traffic and crime. It was easy to get lost in those kinds of places.

Something had always been missing in the cities the Locklears lived in. And Oli was restless, yearning for the types of adventures you only read about in fiction. Something was calling to her. Somewhere with no crowded buildings and busy streets. A place where people weren’t always glued to a screen. Busy little ants with no time for variations in their strict, daily routines. She held onto hope that where they were headed now had hidden wonders to explore. Maybe even new friends to share them with. She knew her brother felt it, too. It’s why they were so eager when their mother brought up the idea of moving again.

Since they had been bopping around from place to place for forever, it'd been hard to make friends. Here and there, they met some OK kids. Their mother called them, "surface friends." They spent their entire lives in a buzzing world of superficial people. Drones, too busy trying to get to their next destination. Next appointment. Next class. Next shift. They didn't appreciate the people or places that were truly important.

Life wasn't meant to be lived that way.

She'd known this simple truth deep in her bones ever since she could remember. Some might think traveling all the time is an adventure in itself. But Oli wanted something different. She wanted to meet people who were just...*more*. Those who actually cared what was going on in her life, and she, theirs. People with real thoughts and dreams and ambitions. The ones who still believe in magic. Even a little.

People like her family. Like their cousin, Gideon, and childhood friend, Veda. And she couldn't wait to see both of them.

They were the only two people their age the twins had ever stayed in touch with. At least she could take comfort in the fact that even if it was only the four of them, they'd make good memories in their last year of high school.

Gideon Little and Veda Biruk grew up in Birch Hollow, a small town in Birch County, all the way across the state in Western Massachusetts. Surrounded by forests and mountains. And scattered with vast, open valleys, and wild, winding rivers. All around the edges of the woods stood the county's namesake; birch trees. And that's where they were headed. Where their new home waited. It'd been a few years since they last made a trip out there to visit, and she couldn't imagine much had changed.

For a long time, it'd been the three of them, Oli, Xander, and their mother, Ryanne. Ten years passed since their father abandoned them without a word. Just vanished into thin air.

Not a day went by where Oli didn't think of him at least once. It was like a dagger to the chest, every time. She hugged the army jacket tighter around her. This old, battered thing, covered in patches used to be his. Even though the thought of him hurt, wearing it made her also somehow feel he was there with her. It was the one possession of his she kept after he'd gone, and it was a bittersweet thing.

"Mom's ordering out tonight," Xander contributed to the silence in the hollowed out room. His voice echoed off the naked walls, and he took off his glasses to clean them.

Oli approved. All three of them had exhausted themselves from all that packing. Never got easier. And she accumulated more and more stuff with every move. But as tired as she was, she didn't think she'd be able to sleep. All she could think of were memories of the house they were moving to; their Nana Bette's old house.

Their Great Uncle Liam inherited the property when Bette died several years back. A couple months ago, he passed away as well. And he'd left the place to the twins' mother, his niece. Liam had been a widower long before Oli was even born, and never had any children of his own. They were the only family he'd had left.

His ashes awaited them at the local funeral home down there. In his will, Liam had wanted his remains spread in the forest out in Birch Hollow, and didn't care to have a ceremony. The twins had never met him, but there was still a sense of loss. There always is, with blood. Liam had lived to an old age of one hundred and four, so he had to have seen a lot. This aching sort of emptiness lived inside Oli because she'd never hear his story from his own lips. Or any other.

It was like that with a lot of their family. All of her grandparents, besides Grandma Bette, were a mystery to her. Three-quarters of them died before she was even born. Of course, there were photographs and videos and stories, but it wasn't the same. Gideon's mum, Anna, was the only surviving member of Oli's father's side of the family. Ryanne didn't have any siblings left to speak of, either. So the twins had always been sort of estranged from both their Wampanoag and Irish roots.

Why the Locklears hadn't visited Liam after Bette passed was a mystery to Oli. She asked her mum about it often, but never got a straight answer. After many attempts, Oli dropped the subject. Ryanne wasn't going to budge.

She plopped down on her mattress. It was on the floor, as her bed frame was already disassembled. Leaning back, she speculated with Xander. “So how tall do you think Gideon is by now?”

“No way he’s over six feet yet. I mean, you’ve seen Aunt Anna. She’s so much shorter than Uncle Sam.”

Her brother leaned back in the chair until it almost tipped entirely backward. He scrambled forward and was able to steady himself.

Oli clapped. “Encore! Encore!”

Xander popped up and took a bow. “Thank you, thank you, I’ll be here all night.”

Oli laughed and tossed an empty box at him. He deflected it with his elbow and stuck his tongue out. “You wanna make a bet about Gideon’s height?”

She nodded. “If he’s over six feet tall now, you owe me twenty bucks.” Groaning, she stood up again to pack up the last couple of shelves from bookshelf number four. But as she reached for the empty box she’d thrown at her brother, the doorbell rang. The twins’ eyes widened and they bounded down the stairs as their mother closed the front door.

Ryanne handed the bags to her kids and smiled, dimples accenting her pale, freckled cheeks. “Chow’s on!”

They sat on the floor in what used to be their living room and ate off paper plates. Oli took a swig of her ice-cold water.

“So,” Xander said with a mouth full of crab rangoon, “How are you feeling about the move, Mum?”

“Sad about Uncle Liam. Already exhausted thinking about all that driving. And lifting and climbing and unpacking. But thrilled nonetheless.” Their mother winked at them. “Movers should be here bright and early. Make sure you don’t sleep through your alarms. No turning back now.”

Ryanne’s eyes moved to a photo sticking out of an open box. A picture of herself with her husband, Puck. Her mother’s pain was almost palpable. It was in her eyes, even if she put on a smile for her children.

Ever since the twins’ father disappeared, Oli focused a lot of her energy on doing new things. At first, it was all a distraction to get out of her own head. Archery, the track team for a while, and photography. Of course, these are all super solitary things to do, but she needed to do them. Xander found his own way of coping. But for Oli, doing these things was a way to release the hurt inside of her every day. A cheat, though. How can you properly grieve someone if you don’t know if they’re alive or dead? Oli became a photographer; to keep the memory of her father close, even if he might not be. Same reason she kept his jacket.

Xander, on the other hand, spoke openly with her about missing Puck. Though, he never brought the subject up with Ryanne in the room. Everyone grieves in different ways. The twins respected that their mother might not ever stop grieving. But that didn’t keep them from worrying about her.

“Mom,” Oli said, putting a hand over her mother’s, “We’re ready. Really.”

Ryanne smiled and sighed. “*Really-really?*”

Xander followed suit and placed his hand atop both of theirs. “Really-really...really. We were never made for city life. This’ll be a good change. And we’ve always loved Nana’s house.”

Her brow furrowed. She still had doubts.

Oli shook her head. “Our two closest friends live out in Birch Hollow. Now we get to be closer to them and see them more often.” Once every year or two—or even three—wasn’t good enough.

Ryanne chuckled. “Well, go, team!”

Out of the three of them, Ryanne was the most excited about the move. She had grown up there and was anxious to go see all her old friends and childhood haunts. Oli had overheard her mother speaking to Veda’s mother recently. She was looking forward to seeing the old high school, most of all. Where she’d met Puck. Could be that Ryanne needed to go, to give herself some kind of closure.

The closer the clock ticked to moving day, the more thrilled Oli became. Like she was a puzzle piece finally falling into place. Like a déjà vu she hadn't déjà-ed or vu-ed yet. A premonition in her gut instead of her mind. It was hard to explain. She only knew that it was the start of something different. A new chapter to read in the book of her life. Something good or something bad. Didn't matter yet, because it was all still ahead for her. For all three of them.

After all the takeout, everyone came down with a case of food coma and went to bed. Ryanne reminded them again to set their alarms for 7AM, and they said goodnight.

Before getting into bed, Oli went into the bathroom to brush her teeth. Afterward, she splashed some cold water on her tawny, tired face, and looked in the mirror. Her hair was getting long these days. In the past, she'd always liked it cut short. But something in the past year or so made her want to grow it out. It fell down a little past her shoulders now. The jet black waves were all over the place. Once she showered and brushed it out in the morning, it would look much better. For now, she braided it so she wouldn't wake up looking like a bird made her hair into a nest.

As she turned to flick the light switch off, she caught a flash of something bright and yellow in the mirror. Turning back, she studied the room. Nothing yellow. Nothing but varying shades of cardboard in the room. Frowning, she thought the MSG in the Chinese food had somehow made her delirious. She wondered if that was even a thing. Or maybe she was just exhausted. Packing did take a lot out of her, after all.

Sighing and shaking her head, Oli shut the light off and went into her bedroom. Plopping down on her mattress, she picked up one of her mother's horror novels. Before she was even a page into the first chapter, she was asleep. And she dreamed.

*Everything was dark. Even the shadows had shadows. In a panic, Oli tried to yell for help, but all that came out was a whimper. A pair of eyes glowed in the empty black before her, alternating between a deep-gold, and a bloody-red. Not so empty anymore.*

*Then a voice spoke.*

*"I know who you are," the creature said. It sounded cold. Hard. Dead. Distorted. Both male and female. Oli couldn't answer. She couldn't even move. Their eyes burned into her like the sun; hungry like a black hole, and just as ancient. "You'll never win, mongrel."*

*Oli wanted to ask what the owner of the red eyes meant, but someone else spoke behind her. A softer, kinder voice.*

*"Don't listen to the imposter," it whispered. Then a hand reached out to touch her shoulder. It was comfortable and familiar somehow. But when she turned, another pair of red eyes stared back at her.*

The alarm on her phone went off, and Oli awoke to a new day. She shook her head and sat up. Her dream faded into the inaccessible depths of her subconscious. With a groan, she reached over to turn off her alarm. Xander was mumbling and grumbling in the next room, too.

As Oli stood up and stretched, she realized she'd left the lamp on all night. Since the sunlight was pouring in, there was no need to leave it on now. She unplugged it and placed it on top of a stack of smaller boxes. Oli frowned for a moment. It was odd that she hadn't woken up even once to shut it off. However, it wasn't strange enough to warrant a brooding session. So, with the dream tucked away in the deepest recesses of her mind, she looked around at all the boxes. And taking a deep breath, she mentally prepared herself for a long day.

The movers made quick work of their belongings, and they were on the road an hour ahead of schedule. Oli grabbed her messenger bag and took one last look in each room. They didn't look the same anymore. She was leaving the last temporary home she'd ever know, and it was scary for a moment. But that's all it was. A blip of a moment in the infinite flow of time.

Oli smiled to herself, and whispered, "Goodbye," to what she hoped was her last temporary home. Then she turned to head out to the car. Xander met her at the door as the Realtor pulled into the



driveway. Ryanne walked over to hand her the keys, and they chatted a moment while the twins got in the car. They'd flipped a coin for shotgun, and Xander won.

"You excited, sis?" he asked. He didn't even gloat about winning.

Oli grinned and nodded. She didn't mind losing to him.

*THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO, NEWGRANGE, KNOWTH, COUNTY MEATH, IRELAND*  
*THE WIZARD*

The night was alive with quiet sounds, and an unusual mist crept over the meadows and fields and rolling, green hills. The sky was clear that summer night, and the moon was full and watchful over the sleeping lands. Within the haze, a hidden doorway opened, and a man stepped out from the corridors of Time onto the lush grass. The cloak he wore swirled around him like the mists, but no one was around, so he lowered his hood.

He was a lot older than he looked, and he looked quite old already. Of course, he could choose to look young, but in this century, it was simpler to pass as elderly. He was more easily dismissed. No one suspected an old man to have the kind of power he wielded.

At the moment, his beard was so long, he'd forgotten what he looked like without it.

In his right hand, he held something long and wrapped in cloth. He paused for a moment at the standing stones outside of the sanctuary to take it all in.

Newgrange.

The place was a wonder for the time in which it came to be. A marvel, even. The whole thing was about an acre of land. A sizable mound spread out before him, with massive stones laid out near the entrance. They were covered in carvings. He traced the outline of a triskele, and heard—as well as felt—the magic activate inside.

Pausing at the doorway, he looked out at the monoliths and sleepy landscape. It was good to be in Ireland once again. The air was laced with traces of Avalon that leaked through the thin places, and it suited him well. He placed a protection spell around the entrance to the tomb before ducking inside. No one would be bothering him, and no one would see what he was doing.

Once he was inside, he waved a hand across his face, and his appearance was young once again. Although his beard remained long. Leaning the object against the stone walls, he put his arms out in front of him and clapped them together, sending echoes cascading down the empty corridors. A floating ball of white light appeared before him.

He then entwined his fingers for a moment and threw them wide apart. The thing shattered into dozens of tiny fragments and scattered about, to light his way. The further down the tight, angular hall he went, the quieter the night sounds from outside.

Newgrange was not just a grave or a temple; but one of the thinnest of thin places in all the world. His world, anyhow. It was already old at this time in history, and it would be older, still, when the time came for the object to be found again.

And so would he.

Once he was in the cross-shaped passage where the actual tomb was located, he cast another spell. He hummed, and the slabs of stone before him moved out of the way. Long enough for him to place the wrapped item inside. After it was secure, the stones rearranged themselves. When they stopped, it looked as if not a thing had been disturbed.

Satisfied with this, the Wizard dismantled the protection spell. Then, with a snap of his fingers, he opened up another invisible doorway and vanished.