



LINGERING IN THE WOODS

Cynthia Ravinski

Lingering in the Woods

A Shaman's Rune vol. 1

By Cynthia Ravinski

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Praise for Linger in the Woods

"In a world of dark, Finnish-inflected magic, Ravinski conjures up a story of persistent evil and of grim duties. Some of those duties are evaded while others are bravely met, but either way, the consequences endure. And the story, too, has a way of staying with you after you've finished it." --*Rudi Dornemann, Book Reviewer and Author*

"... once I started reading it (on my Kindle) I could not stop. This is such a perfect story, in its length and its depth, I just have to praise it. Cynthia does a beautiful work of providing background knowledge as it is pertinent to the story and thus having not a single lull in the narrative. The pace is enthralling, the characters defined and the theme profound...." --*Georg Freese*

"...The strength of the writing was consistent, edgy, even if this was a more magical, fantasy tale. The greatness of this tale was in the depictions of magic actually. The spells or rituals were complex, detailed in steps and tools used. The mythology was sound, and while different easy to follow, riding a nice balance with the suspense built of the unknown elements. I know personally how hard that is to achieve.

There were complicated relationships set up in this tale, ones that tugged on your heart, as well as incited other emotions. The plot was unique and engaging, the fantasy characters believable, the writing superb, the descriptions and illustrations wonderful. As an author with many pubs, I am very impressed..." --*Kirstein Howell, Amazon Vine Voice Reviewer*

"In many books you can tell that the writer had to submit a certain number of words to editor requirements so they filled the story with useless fluff. This would be the complete opposite. The prose is very tight and every word and thought fulfills a vital need. The story involves the usual heroic archetypes but within this short space, Cynthia manages to have them display multiple aspects. For example one 'evil' character also manifests significant sympathy from the reader." --*R. Jennings*

"I found this story to be a great one. Filled with action and surprises it's the perfect book to spend an evening with. It also had a moral to the story if you will. Be strong and face your fears. I think the writer captured the scene in perfect detail and made me want to keep turning pages to the end. I believe you will be as excited by this one as I am and be waiting for more books like this from the author." -- *Melanie C. Adkins, Have you Heard my Book Review blog*

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Why is it taking so long? Usko shivered again. The blankets didn't warm him. They were soaked with sweat. He gasped, the air burned in his throat then ripped into his chest. Fever baked his body dry, yet chilled him through. Snot incessantly ran from his nose. And his head throbbed as if a horse had kicked it. If he'd had the strength, he would have smiled.

He'd deliberately insulted Kipu in a ritual the last dark moon. Not even his mother, with all her power, could drive away a curse from the goddess of disease. Yet it was taking so long, his body slowly wasted. If the disease didn't take his life soon, he'd perish from weakness instead.

Another cough racked his chest. He gagged. The phlegm that erupted from his throat slid out of his mouth and dripped onto his stringy beard. It had never filled out. They said he'd never be a true man, that the sparse, reddish wires that grew from his chin proved that he'd never be like the rest.

"My boy," Satu said as she clutched her son's arms. Kneeling beside his bed, her raven hair flowed over her shoulder, the tips brushing the floor. "Why aren't you curing yourself? You have the power. Don't leave me here alone. It's almost winter." Her voice carried on in a squeaky wail, her youthful face contorted as she sobbed.

Usko knew she only cared for her ageless looks, but they wouldn't keep her warm come winter. *Let her reap what she's sewn.* "Mother," he coughed. His tongue so dry he could hardly rasp, "Remember what I asked."

Her face smoothed and she withdrew to pace the small space of her hut, her shadow growing and shrinking, caught in the dance of the fire. She began singing. He knew the song. It was no humble tune. She was trying to sing him out of his illness with a magical rune song. It

was too late for that, and he just wanted her to stop her noise. But he said nothing lest she change runes to lend his body strength. That was the last thing he wanted.

This discomfort was temporary, and nothing compared to what his mother's kind had done to him. Two decades he'd lived here in exile, kept from his father, forced to live with this woman. No one else welcomed him with anything but curses and stones. *Demon spawn* they'd called him. And the powers of his father's line called to him. As soon as his body rotted, he'd be reborn into his father's kingdom. Walking with the rest of his kind, he'd find his place.

His mother's song faded in the middle of a verse. *Good. She's finally realized there is no hope.*

Darkness crept over him--the fire dying. He just needed to be patient. It couldn't possibly last more than another night. He would discover so many secrets.

"No. Don't go! No! Usko? When you find your father tell him I'll hunt his demon soul and make him pay for what he did to me," she said breathlessly.

Has mother gone outside? What could she need now? He didn't care anymore. Numbness spread through his body as his blood ceased to flow. *Yes.* Gray flickering blurred his vision. Vitality seeped out of his husk and he slipped away from the small cottage on the taiga.

Satu had gone far enough. She stopped the horse under a scrub pine. It was suitable for Usko's interment. No spirits had claimed this grove, and the tribe-folk never came out this far.

She worked quickly. This task needed finishing before dark. Over and over again, she buried the head of her shovel in the rocky dirt. When her hair tangled about the shovel, she pushed it back. When sweat ran out of her hair and down her temple, she wiped it away with the back of her hands, smearing dirt across her cheeks.

She dug and dug. Never mind that he'd asked to be left in the sun. The place for her boy would be far from the ground that good folk walked.

Finally, dirt-smeared and itching with sweat, she judged the hole would hold safe the body of her son. The sky lightened and blushed. The sun traveled too fast this day. Widdershins she circled the grave, while she sang a rune. She floated linden leaves down into the grave, making a bed on which to lay her enchantment. She dug into her pouch, a pinch of the dried grit of a distant sea; she tossed it on the leaves. Sung and seasoned, the pit was ready to accept its ward.

She turned to the sledge. He still had a damned smile on his waxy face. He lay in his furs, bow slung over his shoulder, quiver full. She'd folded a handful of cloudberry into a cloth and tucked it into his belt. At any moment he could spring up to hunt for her dinner, but his eyes were wide and dull. He thought he'd gotten what he wanted, freed his soul of its human limitations. *How sanguine of him.*

She frowned. He'd left her to face winter alone. She stroked the posy at her belt; its power warmed her fingers. She'd show him what he got for leaving her alone.

Like Adj, Usko's demon father, the spirits of the land had abandoned her. Neither the

spirits nor he would ever give her the comfort she wanted. She was truly alone and if the runes were right, a long, cold winter came her way.

“Ingrate,” she snarled and spat on his face. “You left me too.” She grabbed his ankles and dragged him from the sledge. “You were all I had here.” She kicked him into his grave. He thudded into his new home, face up. *Oh well. Too much trouble to climb back down there to twist him around.* She clutched the posy and began circling the occupied grave. Winding a red cord round the stems, she sang the names of her chosen plants. Blessed thistle and green juniper sprigs for purification, betony with its purple blooms and birch twigs to dispel evil, and nightshade and willow switches to make Usko forget his life. Reaching the end of song and cord, she twisted the knot. Reaching over the hole, its thorny twigs bit into her hands, as her son had bitten into her life. *Good riddance.* With a rustle, the bundle landed on his chest. He’d had his chance to stay with her. Now she’d be sure he never went anywhere else again.

No one but her would know his remains were here. She covered him with the forest’s floor, returning it to the way it was before she’d come.

Halfway home, in a clearing, an ancient oak grew. It had been undisturbed for centuries and had grown strong. *Perfect.* With her knife, she peeled back a slip of bark. She drove the tip into the sapwood, cutting out slivers to form a cross to bar passage, and the numerals marking the day. The symbol formed his memorial *karsikko*. This death mark, should her binding fail and he rise, would stop his spirit’s progress into the realm of men. It would tell him to go where his spirit could do no harm, to Tuonela with the other spirits of the dead.

She stared at the cold, darkening blue above her. Jumala, ruler of the sky and everything below it, was up there. If anyone would listen to her pleas to keep Usko from waking, it was he. “Jumala, hear my words. I implore you to lend your power to my work to keep my son’s spirit

shrouded. He deserves no better. See he gets none!”

It was time to return to her empty home. *The fire’s probably out too.*

Chricle let himself smile as the sun broke through the last branches of the forest and warmed his face. He felt better already. They rode past the dark boundary, out of the mysteries of the forest and into the rare pale-gold grasses of the taiga these Finns called home. They didn't have fields like this where he came from, to the east. Just cold mountains, fjords and recently, war. Since he'd come to live here, he'd seen wonders, and terrors, he'd never dreamt of. Especially in the forests. Strange things lurked in the shadows of the great trees, and stranger things yet in the hollows beneath them. Out here, under the open sky, in the realm of men, he could let his guard down.

"Come on men. Winter is coming," Jalmar cried at the blue sky from the front of the line. "You want to make it home before then, right? Ride like you mean it!" The hunters whooped and kicked their horses into a quicker gait at their chieftain's goading.

Chricle hung back with the wagons, shaking his head as he watched their dark braids and stowed weapons fly about. The blessedly-full wagons couldn't keep pace. Eventually the men slowed and circled back to the rest of the group, having gotten the romp out of their systems. The comforts of home would be an easy day-and-half-ride's away. Once back at the settlement, he'd be able to tend to his arm properly.

They'd needed the last hunt of the autumn to be better; their normal grounds weren't providing enough. Chricle read his runes and meditated, and he'd decided it was time to stray from the familiar. So, a small party had ridden further than ever before. Twelve men required fewer provisions to carry in the now heavy wagons. The deer had been plentiful.

"Young Shaman," Jalmar shouted. "Sing us a rune for speed."

On this trip, he had sung frequently to Tapio, the great overseer of these forests, for luck

in the hunt and protection. He'd sing more for his tribe, use his abilities to help them as much as he could. His low voice strayed into the field and danced with the slim birches that dared to grow on the edge of the forest. Whether or not he sang, he knew they wouldn't make it home today; the afternoon was tilting into the gloaming already.

Had it been two months ago his teacher and predecessor, Ilta, would have gone on the hunt and he'd have stayed in the settlement where wayward arrows wouldn't have been able to find him. But the tribe's former shaman had gone to her next home. He blessed her memory. She now rested in Tuonela, with the rest of the spirits of the dead. Since then, the tribe had been in his care. Summer had been peaceful, and he'd hoped the winter would be the same, for it would be long and cold.

The wind reeled, screaming through the trees and pulling at his unbound, flaxen hair. He pulled his furs tighter around him, to hide from the wind's prying fingers. He shivered. Then confusion washed over him. *When had full-night fallen? Why didn't Jalmar stop?*

A jostling step from his horse shook him and he opened his eyes back to the calm sunny field. *No wind, no darkness.* This could only be one thing. He yanked his horse to a stop. The Spirit Guide within that made him a Shaman had shrieked a stormy warning in his soul. Something was nearby, something that would endanger his people.

Wide eyed, he stared into the wall of forest. Dust motes floated in the air around him. Birds and small critters jostled branches, and leaves drifted from limbs to ground undisturbed. No shadows moved where there was nothing to cast them. The inhabitants were raucous as ever. Nothing was amiss there. Yet a chill prickled its way down his spine.

What was it? Where was it? Could they fight it with axes, or would his runes serve?

The sun was low on the horizon, lighting up the grasses they rode through. Heavy seed

heads wagged at him. He clutched the leather bag around his neck and slid off the horse.

With arms held wide, he began a powerful rune of warding. He ignored the burning wound in his arm. Turning, he rattled the bag to summon the song's power. *South, all clear. West, all clear. North all clear. What was the warning for? East.* A darkness brushed his rune. Fear touched his heart. He stopped, willing himself not to fall to his knees in stark terror. *Had it been a warning to run?* He had the presence of thought to consider. *Or am I supposed to challenge it?*

"What is it?" Jalmar's voice broke his concentration. Among the Finns Jalmar was a great hunter. He didn't hold high the value of magic, but he'd trusted Ilta. Was their bountiful hunt enough to make him trust Chricle?

He met his chieftain's eyes. If not for the ache in his arms and the powers now seething in his hands, he'd have forgotten himself and bowed. As Shaman, he bowed to no one and answered to no one but the gods themselves. "Speak your question, Chieftain." The magic would work ten-fold better for a suppliant.

"You start singing for protection for no apparent reason and now you want to play the sage? Stop wasting our time."

"I can tell you what you want to know, only if you ask." He'd thought he found his true home, but if he couldn't satisfy the chieftain, he'd have to find another home.

Jalmar's face hardened. "I'm wondering if I should fear for our safety and you play word games with me, youngster. Out with it."

Close enough, questioning our safety.

Squatting, he pushed down a patch of grass. As he scattered his runes, the scratched and inked bear knuckles gleamed in the sun. Instead of tumbling, they hit the ground solidly. Four

runes showed their faces. The rest hid under grass. His runes had never been that deliberate before. *The Elk*. His Spirit Guide hovered near. *The Thorn reversed. In opposition to Ice*. He grunted. *What is Water doing there?* Deceit, madness, evil, spite, helplessness. *What was back there?*

“It’s a perfect day for travel. Sunny, little wind and we still have an hour or so of light for it.” Jalmar whispered harshly into his ear. “Share your secrets, young Shaman, lest we leave you behind.”

What can I tell him? Chricle picked up Thorn then twisted to face Jalmar. “The runes answer the question you won’t speak.” He lowered his gaze to the horn on Jalmar’s shoulder, then quickly flicked them back to his face. “They spell warning, danger from the east. It is strong. We must travel through the night as the spirits of the sky dance or a great danger may find us. We may not survive this.”

Jalmar’s eyes flicked east, back the way they’d come. His mouth hardened.

Perhaps he thinks my reading incorrect. He couldn’t decide why they didn’t trust him, either because he was foreign, or because he was young.

“Then we must prepare for a threat and make haste. Your rune for speed did not help us very much.” Jalmar stalked off, shouting orders to secure the wagons for a race.

At least Jalmar acted on the warning. The men formed up for a quick ride.

Softly singing runes of protection, he studied the trail they’d left, then he turned and took up the end of the column. Sweat broke out on his back. Something lay back there. He focused on the trail ahead, on what he didn’t know already.

Horses huffed steam into the air, and their hooves filled the air with thunder. If they were a target-followed then they were not going to sneak away. If they could reach the bridge, it

would be a good place to make a stand.

A hint of wood smoke touched his nose. He scanned the horizon, to the north a pale column rose in the distance.

A spike of danger pushed at his rune, from ahead. *Had it outpaced them?* He sang louder. The men halted their beasts and readied their weapons. They looked at him for a hint of what was to come.

This was it. He'd find out what stalked them. If it was as bad as his Guide and the runes made it seem, then no one else in the party had a chance of facing it. He rode to the front. The grasses brushed against his kneecaps. Scanning the distance ahead, searching for a sign of something. There. The bridge. A dark shape lumbered in the brush along the stony bank. He caught a profile with a long hooked nose. Under the bridge, four more shadows shifted.

Unmistakable. Biters of the moon. Trolls. *Out of the forest?* He stopped singing. Was that what his Spirit had warned him about?

"Young Shaman, sing! They'll come for us," someone said behind him.

Chrige held his tongue. The trolls halted and shuffled, just curious about them. That they didn't attack made him curious, too. They should've been more aggressive. A tiny voice in the back of his mind mumbled something. Their odd behavior meant something. Best not to act yet. Watch and wait.

He nudged his horse, turning to Jalmar. "We have to make a decision now. They are weak, and out of place. They won't attack. If we wait, they might leave. Or we can fight them. I suggest we wait." He didn't want to take any unnecessary chances with trolls. The horses pranced, and the men grumbled. They didn't agree. They wanted to fight.

"Thank you, young Shaman. I thought you said your danger was following us?"

“Yes, that is what the runes revealed. This may be unrelated. Again I say we wait.”

Jalmar faced the bridge, still and silent. He turned back to his men with a grim face, but his eyes burned. He’d devised a plan. “Men, this is what we will do. First we will ride back to the wood.” Men groaned. They wanted action. “Tonight we will rest and prepare to face them at dawn when they will be at their weakest.” He kicked his horse and circled back toward the wood.

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