

The Wyrde Woods Chronicles

LORD OF THE WYRDE WOODS

BOOK TWO

DANCE INTO

THE WYRD

(SAMPLE CHAPTERS FOR

LAMBS)

NILS VISSER

One for Sorrow

Two for Joy

Three for a Girl

Four for a Boy

Five for Silver

Six for Gold

Seven for a Secret

Never to be Told

Part Catterah: Five for Silver

20. The Faery Bridge

The fox lay by the base of a towering ash basking in the sunshine, its coat a warm red in the sun's light. When it spotted us it stared at us but remained where it was for a minute or two before casually getting up and ambling into the woods at its ease, not the least impressed by us.

"It's beautiful," I said, thrilled by the encounter.

"I suppose so," Willick answered carefully.

It was Saturday and Willick had shown up at the Owlery in the morning to ask if I cared to see some more of the Wyrde Woods. I had been delighted of course and we were now heading south-east towards Roreford.

"You don't like foxes?" I asked in surprise.

"I doant mind Mus Reynard when he sits beneath a tree in the sun," Willick explained. "But him be full o' sly mischief Mus Reynard be, and most o' that seems to be unaccountably concerned with mine chickens."

I laughed, feeling as bright as the beautiful morning. A whole week's stay in the Wyrde Woods, I could still hardly believe it. The weekends had been magic already.

"What I like be badgers," Willick continued. "There be many setts in the Wyrde Woods."

"Setts?"

"Aye, those baggas dig into the ground I dunnamy tunnels and chambers and live there, a whole clan o' them in each sett."

"I have never seen a badger," I said regretfully.

"Well that be something to remedy, surely," Willick said.

"I thought they were really hard to spot."

"Ole Brock be shy all right. But naun if ye know what ye be doing. Evening times be best, hide near the sett and stay middling quiet," he gave me a pointed look and I grinned.

"Now be a good time as well," Willick continued, "cubs come out to play."

"Really?" I wanted to see badger cubs at play.

"I'll take ye sometime this week to see," Willick promised and I grinned happily.

The ruins of Roreford were spooky. The village was mostly clustered around a small church with another huddle of buildings a bit further on by the Rore River. All the buildings had been constructed with the same roughly cut sand stones I had seen at St. Lewinna's. All that was left of them were empty shells. They looked forlorn with their gaping doorways and windows. The church was relatively free of trees and undergrowth and its walls were mostly intact. The surrounding buildings had been reclaimed by the woods though, covered in ivy and various plants which had found tenacious lodging between the crumbled walls. Some walls were little more than piles of stones. A few former houses had trees growing inside them, an oddity which I liked.

I looked at the broad open space in front of the church and felt a moment of discomfort. This was where Roderick Malheur had the unfortunate village girls stripped and flogged hundreds of years ago and I could imagine the humiliation the poor girls must have experienced before pain and the realisation of imminent death became their sole concern. It made being manhandled to the isolation cell in view of a full common room seem relatively mild all of a sudden. I felt an odd kinship with the girls.

"Is the watermill there?" I pointed at the buildings by the Rore River. Willick nodded and we walked over to the river. As we got closer an odd sound which had been puzzling me got louder, a distant roar of some sorts.

"Is it the Rore River which is roaring?" I joked.

"Aye, tis." Willick pointed south. "The Falls and Fey's Pool be anigh, naun far."

"Is that why they called it Roreford?"

"Mayhap it be," Willick nodded.

There was an ancient stone bridge leading over the river just by the outlying buildings and we walked onto it. The ruins here edged the water. One was bigger than the others and I reckoned I could see where the water wheel had been attached. I shivered, thinking of those poor village girls who were doomed to haunt the scene of their deaths for eternity. Behind Roreford I could see the high ragged walls of Hood's Gorge looming up on either side of the river and I thought of Puck who had promised to take me climbing there. To my disappointment Joy had told me he had gone up north for the weekend and I missed him sorely.

"Disyer be the Farisee Bridge," Willick said.

"The Faere Folk?"

"Aye, that they be called as well. Long time ago there be a knight who lived at the castle. He were called Richard Malheur. Sir Richard."

"He went to fight the Knucker at Devil's Tarn!" I said.

"Aye so he does, ye've been there?"

"Yes, Puck took me."

"Aye, the lad reafes up on Knuckers so he does, tis unaccountable, Knuckers and Faere Folk have taken his fancy." Willick nodded. "Puck tell ye what happened to Sir Richard?"

"Only that he was sorely wounded and that he was taken to Pook Hall."

"Aye, that he was. But there's more to this tale. During hisn sojourn in Pook Hall Sir Richard be much taken by Niada, a Farisee healer. Now Niada she doant be exceptionally beautiful for Farisee standards, naun alikes them Shy

Maidens for example, howsumdever, to Sir Richard - Niada be the fairest of them all."

"He fell in love with her?"

"Aye, that he did. And what be more, some-one-time it does happen, Niada fell in love with Sir Richard as well."

I sighed. I liked thrillers and horrors but wasn't immune to love stories.

"This caused middling complication, all-along-o' Sir Richard having to gwaon back to Malheur Hall and it be unheard o' for a Farisee to live amidst humans."

"Unless they are a changeling," I corrected him, having recently examined myself in the mirror to see if my ears had just a hint of pointiness. I had got impatient and squeezed the top ends together which produced satisfying pointiness indeed.

"Unless they be changeling," Willick agreed. "So Sir Richard and Niada, they axe for an audience with the King and Queen."

"King Oberon and Queen Titania!"

"Zackly. Oberon jes laughed and laughed. Him thought Sir Richard be a middling fool for believing there could be any happy ending to such a coupling. Howsumdever, deep in hern heart Titania be touched and twere Titania who relented. Queen Titania decreed that Sir Richard and Niada be allowed one year together, howsumdever, she warns them to be satisfied with that and naun be wanting more; love and the pain o' parting or naun."

I thought about this. Would it be better to share a short period with someone, knowing all the time the pain of separation that awaited you at the end of it, or forego it altogether? How much time would I be given with Puck? If at all. I had no idea yet if those kisses by the bridge were an incidental lapse of reason. I hoped not.

"Willick?"

"Aye lass."

“Can I ask you a personal question?”

“If ye mus,” he looked wary.

“If you had been given the choice, back then, knowing your time with Joy would be so short; would you still have done it?”

Willick looked out over the river, mulling this over for a moment.

“I would naun have missed it for all the money in disyer wurreld,” he said at a last. “Ourn time be short but middling unaccountable, so twere.”

“Do you love Allison?”

To my surprise Willick burst into laughter.

“Shouldn’t I have asked that?” I asked.

“Tis naun that, jes that ye be refreshingly direct and forrard.” He chuckled and I smiled.

“I need to get used to it some Wenn, but I like it in Joy, so I’ll learn to cope with two o’ yern kind at the Owlery,” he smiled and then hypnotised me with his earnest eyes. “Joy became a good friend Wenn, a very good friend. Howsumdever, Allison naun be a second prize for me, I still feel those butterflies in mine belly every time I sees Allison.”

I nodded, pleased that this had been clarified because I had been wondering about it.

“What did Sir Richard and Niada choose?”

“Niada gwoan with Sir Richard to Malheur Hall. He got her with a boy child and for eleven months he were the happiest man in the wurreld.”

“And the twelfth month?”

“Niada accepted Titania’s decision; hern knowing that to disobey Titania would’ve meant calling misfortune on hern lover. But Sir Richard be dreading the moment more and more, thinking o’ all manner o’ wild plans to keep Niada by hisn side. He becomes middling poorly from all hisn worries and naun enjoyed that last month much.”

"I can imagine, but to throw it away like that..."

"Aye. One dawn Sir Richard awoke and Niada's side o' the bed were empty. He looks out the window and sees Niada walking out o' Malheur Hall, across the moat bridge and into the Wyrde Woods she goes. Sir Richard grabbed their young babe Foster and follows Niada, catching up with her and pleading and begging, holding up the little chavie and axing her naun to let Foster grow into manhood without a mam."

I felt a stab of pain in my heart.

"They reach disyer bridge and Niada starts to descend into the river, there be a gate to Pook Hall here back in those days. The Water Gate. Sir Richard makes one last try to keep Niada with him and grabs her shawl. But the shawl comes off and Niada tells him to keep it well and fly it alikes a banner if he or Foster ever needed to summon Farisee help. Then her disappeared and Sir Richard naun ever sees his love again. Tis said Niada visited Foster thrice, but her naun laid eyes on Sir Richard again."

"That's so sad," I said. "What happened to Foster?"

"Foster grew up and became Lord o' the Wyrde Woods alikes his da. There's a painting o' Foster Malheur in the castle."

I recalled that Puck had mentioned Foster when he listed the Malheurs he hoped he took after: Sir Richard, Foster and Oscar.

"And the shawl?"

"Ah, the Farisee banner still be in Malheur Hall, akept in a chest in the Drummer's Vault. It can only be flown twice and naun more. And twere already used once in days o' the Waus. Mind ye, most o' the Malheurs doant put much stock in Farisee tales."

"So if Foster was half Farisee, that means Puck has Farisee blood in him?"

"Aye, but I reckon most folk round here have some o' that, surely," Willick shrugged as if this were a normal thing. "The Farisee doant live with humans, but mix aplenty in other ways."

Meaning that they like shagging, I thought with a grin.

“Ye be wanting to see the Falls and the Fey’s Pool?”

“Yes please!”

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We followed a path which wound around the Fey’s Pool so that we came to its banks on the south side. We faced a sheer wall of rock across the pool, some twenty-five yards high and a hundred yards wide. It was broken in the middle by the Rore River which plunged down vertically in a thundering cascade of foam causing a lively dance of waves around the area where the roaring river crashed into the pool.

The word pool was misleading, the water stretched along the entire length of the cliff and then it was another sixty yards to the opposite bank where we were standing. To our right was a small circular island, about twelve feet from the shore, all of it shaded by a huge weeping willow, the lower branches of which touched the lake’s surface.

Willick started telling the tale of the Fey with relish and I didn’t have the heart to tell him Puck had already told me. He did add an element to it, telling me that walking around the island widdershins seven times would summon the Fey for those who were keen to be seduced and condemned to spend an eternity watching her bathe.

Like Puck, Willick dwelt on the fact that the Fey bathed nude and it was this that enticed men into the pool to their doom. He seemed quite taken by it. I wondered at the fascination men seem to have with female nudity but had to admit the Falls were a spectacular sight and there was something about the lake in the middle of the forest which did seem magical and the tale attached to it seemed fitting.

On the way back to the Owlery however, it was the story of Sir Richard and Niada which played in my mind. It was even better than the poor old Shy Maidens and the deserved punishment of Oberon and Powke. That was still a good story. Although Titania’s revenge had turned out badly for the maidens Titania had at least stood up and fought for herself. Just as Lewinna and Ellette had taken on the Knuckers and Joy had tackled Stubbles. But

Niada's story went deeper. It must have been horrible for all three of them; that parting by the bridge. I'd give Puck a chance, but if he didn't come back quickly I would just have to bag myself a fit Faere Folk prince instead. See what conditions Titania would lay down for that.

Willick said his goodbyes by the gate and I went into the Owlery to find that Joy had prepared a shepherd's pie and I ate with relish.

While we were eating there was a distinct "Oehoeh" sound from the living room. I was surprised. Previously I had always assumed that was the only sound owls made. I had never heard one of Joy's owls use it before though. The foursome had an incredible repertoire of sounds and often managed to convey the impression that there were about two dozen owls in the Owlery rather than just the four.

"Oehoeh," the call was repeated.

"Oehoeh," Joy called back.

"You're having a conversation with them?" I grinned.

"Tis Aethel, hern mating call. If I doant answer she gets awful cranky."

"She thinks you're her mate?"

"Tis imprint," Joy sighed.

"Quiddy?"

"Aethel be raised by humans, she never see another owl till she comes here. Owls alikes that, we say they have a human imprint."

"You didn't have her when she was a chick?"

"Naun o' them. Truth be told Wenn, though I love them a load, I'd never gwoan and get an owl chick. Owls ought to be out there in the woods and over the fields. Flying free."

"So where did they come from?"

"Sheere-folk," Joy pulled a dirty face that made me laugh. "Think it would be fun to have an owl as pet. Doant realise ye can't stroke or pet an owl alikes a cat or dog. They be wild animals, instinct to kill and them'll use

theirn claws and beaks happily if something aint to theirn liking. Owls be needing a lot o' special care: Beaks, talons, room to fly. All o' disyer owls were poorly when they bring them here."

"And you can't set them free?"

"Some folk gwaon does that and the birds'll starve. Most jes doant cope in the wild anymore and them folk jes doant cope with pellets, poop, ceca and molt feathers."

"Pellets? Ceca?"

"Owls regurgitate fur and bones o' their food in pellets. They aint polite, when it comes out, it comes out, wherever they be. And Ceca is at end o' intestines, they empty it once a day. Looks like chocolate pudding but it smells something awful."

I remembered smelling something awful in the living room once but I had assumed then that Lady had farted. She was a brilliant dog in all ways, but I had never realised dogs have no qualms about farting anywhere at all.

"Oehoeh," Aethel called.

"Oehoeh," Joy answered. "As for ourn talk...?"

She was referring to her stated intention to talk about my habit of getting into trouble.

"Joy," I said. "My mum and dad?"

Though I didn't mind listening to her opinion on the mayhem which I seem to attract like honey draws Pooh Bear she did know more about my parents and I really wanted to know.

"I really need to know," I said pleadingly.

"Aye, I reckon ye does," Joy nodded.

"You said you only knew them shortly. But you read people well, don't you?"

Joy sighed. "Aye, I does. I did meant to tell ye, sweetie, that first weekend."

"I know, there wasn't much time," I smiled. "Just knowing that Dad was from Brighton, and Mum from the Edgelands – it's made a such a difference just knowing that,"

"I know the yearning, Wenn," Joy said softly. After a pause she continued talking, louder this time. "There have been folk tasked with being Guardian of the Wyrde Woods since Roman times."

"Forever ago," I said, "Are you one of..."

Joy raised her hand to ward off my question. "Let me tell the tale, liddle one."

I nodded.

"Mus have been somewhere in '86 I recollects. One o' the Guardians asked me to come to the Raven's Roost. We had spoken of a danger – a darkness in the Wyrde Woods, howsumdever, we couldn't put ourn finger on it. She introduced me to Ashley and Nyle."

Just hearing their names filled me with warmth. I already had a dozen questions but stayed silent.

"They were refugees o' sorts. I doant ken the details, Wenn. The Guardian had offered them shelter. Most-in-general, the talk was about the darkness. Yern mam ken more about it. The next and last time we met was here, in disyer Owlery, about a year later. Twere crisis by then."

Joy paused and looked pained for a moment.

"The Guardian and yern parents were in the midst o' it and came for sanctuary. They spent the night. Yern parents in yern room, ye'll be wanting to know."

I nodded happily.

"The darkness was overcome, howsumdever, at a cost. There always be a price for magic Wenn, always. There be no exceptions."

I nodded again. It sounded ominous but I was focused on my mum and dad.

"I told ye what price they paid," Joy said.

“Ash...Mum disappeared into the Wyrde Woods, Dad was shattered.”

“Yern father was a good man, Wenn. Full o’ life him were. Alikes most young men he thought himself to be invincible; tmight have been a flaw as he were as reckless as yernself can be, howsumdever, hisn optimism kept Ashley on her feet. He doted on her, twere a sight to see. There be plenty o’ men who would have left her to hern own devices all-along-o’ yern mam’s gift.”

My mind boggled and I struggled not to unleash a barrage of questions. I had cursed him at times for his abandonment of me. The way Joy described him though, it didn’t sound like he was the type of man to just walk away for no reason.

“Gift?” I dared a question.

“Aye, Ashley had a gift. Ye have some o’ it too.”

“I do?” I was surprised.

“Ye be very receptive to yern surroundings. The way ye reacted to the Shy Maidens, or Niada’s tale. Ye pick things up.”

I raised my eyebrows; clearly Puck and Will had related the details of our outings to her. I recalled my reaction to Nan Malone’s Chestnut; so I took after my mother in that fashion. I had often wondered as to what they were like as people but this was the first time I realized that I could discover part of their character in myself.

“Tis something to mind,” Joy warned. “Ye doant have it as strong as yern mum, howsumdever, the intensity o’ it can come and go; and it can grow quick in the Wyrde Woods.”

I was pleased to hear that; it reinforced my feeling that I was changing in the Wyrde Woods and took away my doubt that I was just projecting a whimsical fancy.

“She were a troubled soul; kind-hearted as can be, howsumdever, very wary o’ the world having learned that dunnamy folks will take theirn advantage

o' the likes o' Ashley. She trusted Nyle. She trusted Nyle's friend, young Mackellow. She trusted the Guardian."

"Surely she trusted you?" I couldn't help but ask.

"All-along-o' the Guardian's insistence that she could and should. Twould have taken more time for Ashley to let down hern guard," Joy grimaced.

"Yern mam were perceptive to more than the normal eye can see, Wenn. She had learned hernself to shut hernself off. The gift she had were also a curse."

"She saw shims," I said softly, thinking of the nuns I had seen at the priory.

"Saw them, felt them, heard them, smelled them and with some she spoke." Joy said.

"Was that what drove her..." I hesitated. Drove her to the edge of madness? Drove her cray? Drove her to disappear in the Wyrde Woods?

"Tis unbeknownst to me," Joy said. "Howsumdever, it be the most likely reason."

"But after they left the Owlery again..."

"Twere to do battle with the darkness," Joy said quietly. "She won, Wenn. She defeated it. Howsumdever, she doant return."

"The price of magic..." I pondered.

Joy nodded.

"And the Guardian? Maybe she knows more?"

Joy closed her eyes and I could feel that her heart was pained. I felt guilty for breathing life into old memories but at the same time I was selfishly glad that I had; it felt as if I had something to hold on to at last. Maybe it was just clutching at straws but it gave me a sense of peace.

Joy opened her eyes again. She looked much older all of a sudden. "The Guardian disappeared as well, I doant know what happened to Maisy."

"I am sorry," I said awkwardly. I reached out for her hand and folded mine around it; careful to avoid giving it a light squeeze on account of her affliction.

Joy smiled warmly and gave me a grateful look. "It be a shared pain, lass."

I nodded and returned her smile.

"That be all I recollect, Wenn," Joy said. "They were good people, that much ye need know. Both o' them live on in yernself. Ye'll have plenty to be thinking o' now, I reckon. We'll talk more tomorrow."

I nodded happily, glad that she understood I would have to sort out all this new information first. Revel in her judgement that Mum and Dad were good people at heart and do so in the very room where they had once spent a night; a room that was now mine. Transform my worry that I took after them in a heartless fashion into a celebration of Dad's energetic optimism and Mum's empathy...they were me, I was them. My head was spinning as I climbed to my loft room – my home in the Wyrde Woods and my first real connection with my absent parents.

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On Sunday morning I came down the stairs drawn by the homely smell of fresh coffee. After breakfast I cleared up the dishes and did the washing up while Joy was messing about with dead mice. She bred them in one of the sheds and had fetched four of them which she quickly killed after which she started removing some of the intestines. It looked horrible but Joy did not seem to mind.

"Owl feeding time," Joy said and I followed her into the living room.

The owls knew what was going to happen and launched into tumult.

"Eeeeeeeeghh eeeeeeghh" Aethel sounded like a lamb with a sore throat.

"Mheeeew Mheeeew" Horsa mewled like a kitten.

"EEEEEEEECCCCCHHHHHH" hissed Bran.

"Ccccchhhwwaaaaaa!" Bronwen rasped.

I grinned.

Joy walked from box to box, depositing a mouse in each. The scritch owls attacked theirs with ferocity, Horsa picked at his carefully as if he didn't trust it and Aethel hid hers beneath some straw.

"Aethel likes to save it for later," Joy explained. "Now, let's yern and I talk. We've had ourn talk about yern mam and da, howsumdever, there were another talk I be wanting to have with ye."

I nodded and we sat down on the couch by the fireplace. To my surprise I was nervous.

"Ye have a knack for getting yernself into trouble lass," Joy sighed. "I doant blame ye, having seen that place they keeps ye. Doant hold much with men who punch women meself. That man be a right scrowse."

"They make me angry sometimes," I admitted.

"Aye, I can understand, but Wenn?"

"Yes?"

"I think that all-along-o' folk like that ye have an imprint as well."

I nodded.

"Ye acts gurt and tough, but I have seen ye be a liddle girl as well. A sweet child when ye be here with me, but I think in Odesby, naun so sweet."

"What do you mean?" I narrowed my eyes.

Joy laughed.

"Look at yernself lass. Ye jes did it. One thing that disagrees with ye, and ye tense up, all vlothred, ready to defend yernself alikes a bagga, scrowing at me, snuffy and tassy. Should I be afearred o' ye now?"

I recalled that Willick had asked the same question and shook my head.

"You don't know what it's like there, it's so bloody unfair sometimes," I said in a small voice.

"And doant ye gwoan cause a scramble by playing disyer hurt liddle girl with me neither," Joy admonished me. "Ye promised honesty."

I looked at her sharply.

"Aye snuffy wildcat," Joy grinned and I relaxed a bit. She was right of course, but cutting so close to the truth that it made me uncomfortable.

"I know ye've been handed a rotten deal lass," Joy continued. "Howsumdever, I doant think ye ought to be telling me nor anyone else that they doant understand what that's alike, surelye."

"Most don't," I protested more vehemently than I intended. "They grow up with bloody parents who bloody well care about them."

"This aint about specifics Wenn," Joy was unfazed. "Ye had yern mam and da taken away. Tis unfair. I had mine child taken away. Tis unfair. Mine son had hisn mam taken away from him. Tis unfair and I doant thinks Nate grew up to be a happy man. Ye think I doant hear Puck be hag-ridden when he stayed here? Scared and shouting for hisn mam in the night? Tis unfair. Even that head-doctor o' yern, Miss Hare..."

"What about her?"

"Lass be from here, Wolfden be where she growed up. Ye doant want to know how oft a time hern mam axed me to come to treat liddle Mary and hern sisters. Blued eyes and bruises, poor liddle girls. Hern dad Bill drink too much, so he does. I dunnamy a time he beat them bloody."

"Mary Hare?"

"Aye, hern escaped to University and learnt a fancy trade, but how much confidence has becoming a head-doctor given hern?"

"None," I mumbled, suddenly feeling bad about how I had played on that insecurity more often than not.

"And still naun healed, for hern attaches hernself to a bully once again at hern work. Look lass, there be a pain in ye, I can see that. I can feel it. And naun matter what Mary Hare tries, tis naun gwoan help much. They try to fix yern head, but tis yern soul that be wounded, aint that so?"

I nodded.

"Yern pain will never gwoan away Wenn, never. Tis up to ye whether ye learn to live with it or naun. If ye does, it becomes easier to cope with."

"What is it to you anyways?" I snapped. I just couldn't help it but I felt like she was laying my soul bare and I didn't like it. This place shouldn't become like Nowhere Place.

Joy looked at me for some time; there was no anger or impatience in her eyes, but none of her empathy either.

"Why does ye think ye're welcome here Wenn?" Joy spoke in a dangerously soft tone. "All-along-o' that ye reckon I be lonely?"

"No, I am sorry," I shook my head.

"Puck sayed that ye liked being part o' us."

"I do, I do."

"Then ye'll have to accept that part of being loved means ye'll have to accept that folk have concerns about ye as well. And have the right to does so. Ye cannot jes want the parts o' this arrangement that ye likes and then get tassy about the rest that be part and parcel of being loved."

I nodded and looked at the floor in confusion.

"Even in Odesby there be naun reason to get tassy about everything. There's real pain that means somewhen ye reacts like that. That mister Scrowse what punched ye hounding ye with Calcott; I would have reacted the same as ye did. But there also be feeling almighty sorry for yernself."

I took this coolly. I didn't like it but had to admit it was true sometimes.

"Puck tells me ye want to fight for the Wyrde Woods."

I was surprised. When Puck had said that he needed to speak to people I thought he meant the Weard Hunt, not Joy. So she was involved too?

"Yes, I do," I said.

"And that be the reason I need ye to pick yern fights with care," Joy said. "Tis Catt Malheur who be ourn main foe in this. And that draggle-tail will fight real dirty. I need to be able to trust that ye doant fly off the handle."

"I understand."

"And will ye remember that if and when ye be pointed at yern actions? Listen afore ye reacts snuffy alikes a wildcat?"

"I'll try."

"Naun, ye either does or doant."

"I will do it." I said, though not without some anger.

"One more thing lass," Joy relaxed and her eyes sparkled again.

"Yes?"

"If ye want things to work out with Puck, tis the same rules. Ye maun scratch hisn eyes out if ye think him be meddling in yern life, surelye."

My eyes grew wide and Joy laughed.

"Well doant look at me as if I have the power o' second sight lass. I naun be blind ye know."

"Oehoeh," Aethel wanted attention.

"Oehoeh," Joy answered. She continued: "Good, well I be glad that's over and done with. Now, I've a treat for ye."

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The treat was clearing out the owl boxes. This had to happen one box at a time because the owl was released during the operation. This meant the other owls had to have their boxes shut to avoid the bloodbath Joy assured me would inevitably happen if one owl encroached upon the territorial sensitivities of another. Joy inspected the poo at the bottom of the boxes closely, she said they were tell-tale signs of health, and counted the pellets to keep track of them; they told her when it was feeding time. We also removed remnants of mice and chicks –aside from Aethel' last mouse which she hadn't touched yet- because the owls liked to hide bits and pieces of their food for later consumption but decomposing mice and chicks were bad news. I was impressed by Joy's knowledge and began to see how an average

family buying an owl because they thought it was cute had no idea what they were getting into.

The best bit of the job was that Joy gave me a thick leather glove to wear and one by one Bronwen, Bran, Horsa and Aethel sat on my hand as Joy put fresh straw in their boxes. It was piff having them this close by, I had already stopped associating Joy's owls with Ufmanna. Joy said that if they got a bit more familiar with me we'd be able to take them outside to fly them which sounded like fun.

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We had the leftovers from the previous evening's shepherd's pie for dinner. Joy poured us both a glass of her birch sap wine which was semi-sweet with a lemony taste and tasted good.

"I forgot to ask Willick something about Roreford yesterday," I said.

"Well, ye can try mine recollections, but it be Will and Puck who knows most about the Wyrde Woods."

"I think you know far more than you let on," I said. "Honesty right?"

After having seen Joy in action during the meeting at Nowhere Place I was left in no doubt who the natural leader was around here. Her astute questions there showed a far greater awareness of the outside world than I expected, probably because she liked to portray herself as an isolated country bumpkin. I suspected that she knew just as much if not more than the menfolk about local matters too.

Joy regarded me sharply for a moment. "Ye're clever lass, and ye be right, I does owe ye an apology."

I smiled; pleased my intuition had been right. "How was Roreford destroyed?"

"Twere during the Civil War. Royalist and Parliament armies coming to and fro fighting with each other. Naun difference for the common folk. When sodgers came there'd be raping, killing, thieving and burning. Doant matter which side they were fighting for."

Joy stopped for a moment and I pictured a village in flames, screaming villagers, laughing soldiers.

"Folk in all of Sussex had enow, naun jes in the Wyrde Woods. Villagers armed themselves and organised defences. Called themselves Clubmen."

"Good, did they get the bastards?"

"At first, aye. Round here the Clubmen built palisades atop Arthur's Fort, jes as there had been in the Old Days. When sodgers came, men, women, chaves, cattle, pigs, chickens: All hid behind the palisades and were safe. Sodgers what'd come anear were mighty sorry they'd tried."

"People power," I was thrilled; better to fight back than be passive.

"Aye, but in the end, it came to trouble. Neither side wanted common folk learning how to fight. It made war less appealing they said. They made a truce and attacked Arthur's Fort together. They brought cannon; twere a slaughter. Survivors fled to Roreford, hoping the Sheere-folk would naun know their way in the Wyrde Woods."

"It makes some sense, but Roreford was..."

"Malheur fambly knew how to find it," Joy said. "It were them that showed the sodgers the way to Roreford."

"Why?" It didn't make sense to me, presumably being landlord meant gathering income from rent and taxes. Why destroy your own income?

"To set an example. This be what happens when ye forget yern place in the scheme o' things. Does ye have history at school Wenn?"

"Yes, but it's not like the stories Puck, Willick and you tell. Not real people. Mostly Kings, Queens, Prime Ministers...that sort of thing."

"Naun much have changed then. Ye never heard o' Willikin o' the Weald? Watt Tyler? The Diggers? The Levellers? The Chartists? The Suffragettes? The Wallies?"

"Only Willikin, Puck told me about him, he hid in a cave in the gorge."

“Aye, that he does. Time and again common folk have raised their banners to protect theirn rights. Time and again their Lordships have used every means they could to crush such unity.”

Joy stopped for a moment.

“Diggers, for example, were up in Surrey, at St. George’s Hill. They mus have known landowners could naun and would naun allow them to succeed. Yet, they went ahead with their dream o’ common land anyway.”

“And were attacked?”

“Aye, and defeated. Tis the same with disyer motorway, ye understand? Times have naun changed much. We, the folk o’ the Wyrde Woods and the Weald will rise to protect what be ourn. What does ye think will happen?”

“They will try to crush us.” I said quietly, thinking of the jackboots I had read about in Puck’s hideout.

“And probably succeed. Ye understand? I axe all-along-o’ ye need to know what might happen.”

“Even though you know winning is unlikely, you will fight anyway,” I said softly.

“Tis a fine tradition of common folk, we maun ever stop trying. Remember that, whatever happens ye mus always keep trying.”

“Then we fight.”

“But naun tonight,” Joy smiled. “Tis bedtime for me, I be hurting a liddle.”

I stood up and kissed Joy on the forehead and then went upstairs to my room.

§ § § § § § §

I was still up about an hour later looking at the ceiling. I had tried to read by candlelight but couldn’t focus on the words; there was too much going on in my head as I tried to digest the day. Specifically about Joy’s talk on my *I-don’t-take-anything-from-anyone* attitude.

What Joy had suggested was that I was transferring this habit to my life in the Wyrde Woods. You can't just take the bits you like; it's all part of the deal. I noticed with a wry smile that even now something in me immediately resisted the notion of being told by anybody what to do, even if it was a suggestion rather than a command. I was like those Clubmen and Diggers really, asserting independence even though I knew the system always won and I had no real freedom to speak of. But my habit was so deeply ingrained that I was confusing Joy and Willick for the system. They weren't, Joy had specifically said that it was part of being loved.

I smiled ruefully. I basically did not know what it was like being loved. It had never happened to me before. The ex-boyfriend just played me to get laid and I had gone along with the game because it seemed the thing to do, a status of a kind for the both of us but there had been no real affection. Biggs adored me, but that was different too. He wasn't 'company', for him everything revolved around that worship. I was fond of him in a funny way but that was it. Puck was different, he seemed to actually enjoy my company and I liked his. There was a mutual appreciation there and though I had doubted it then I now realised he had been dropping hints that he wouldn't mind more than just that but had left the decision up to me. Not quite like being swept off my feet by manly resolution but just wanting to be near him was something that was beginning to ache.

Then there were Joy and Willick too. Thinking back of all the trouble they had gone to a second time just for my sake meant that they did really care. They had made a real effort. The closest I had been to someone making an effort for me was Michael, but that was just the effort of listening to me and setting me challenges because he had known that triggered me. Thinking back I realised he had set challenges to achieve but never challenged me in my thinking. Joy *was* challenging me and I had so nearly ruined everything when I started snapping at her; because for me it was an easy step from there to the anger I couldn't control. The very fear Willick had voiced in the car that day when he brought me back to Odesby.

Being loved, I decided, was difficult and something I was going to have to work on before I pushed those offering it away.

There was a rasping at the window which I only dimly perceived and ignored at first as I was trying to work things out in my head. The rasping became a gentle tapping and I rolled over to see what it was.

PUCK!

Puck's grinning face was outside the window. I opened it and he clambered through, I caught him as he more or less fell onto the bed and I kissed him fiercely.

"How did you get up there?" I whispered when our mouths parted.

"Ivy," he whispered back. "Old thick stems."

"Where's Lady?"

"At Rob Hornsby's farm, picking her up tomorrow."

"And where the hell have you been?"

"I weren't in the alus missus, and I does only drink one pint in there while I doant be there."

I grinned happily and poked him in the ribs.

"Ouch," he said, and then added, "Up north in Yorkshire."

"But I wasn't up North, I was down South," I reprimanded him.

"When I couldn't find you in Yorkshire I came straight back," Puck nodded in all seriousness.

I surprised myself with the extent to which I was totally delighted by his unexpected appearance. After we talked some more he started unlacing his shoes and unbuttoning his trousers. Even his bloody boxers were green I noticed with a grin. I was already down to my knickers and singlet and when he crawled under the covers in his boxer shorts and t-shirt I felt some trepidation because I wasn't sure what he was expecting.

If he had wanted to take the kissing further, even all the way, I would have. But only to please him really. I wasn't quite ready for it myself. My worries were unnecessary though, Puck was happy to just lie with me in his arms like that first night in his hideout. It was comforting and I relished the touch of his arms around me. I felt safe and sheltered and figured I had more or less scored my Faere Folk prince; green boxers, glasses and all.

21. Pathfinders

“Wenn sweetie,” Joy’s voice called from far away. I opened my eyes slowly and smiled when I realised I was at the Owlery. My smile widened when I realised I was spooned up against Puck, his chest warm against my back and arm wrapped around my middle. I wriggled till I had turned around and saw that he was still asleep. I traced his earlobes to check if there was any sign of Faere Folk pointiness. They weren’t quite rounded at the top, more square-like, definitely not Elfish though. I ran a fingertip along his eyebrows and the ridge of his nose.

“Wenn, time to get up.” Joy called again.

Puck slowly opened his eyes and smiled when he saw me.

“Coming Joy!” I called out and then whispered. “That silly beard of yours, shave it off.”

“Never,” Puck whispered back.

“Puck it looks like you have pubes stuck on your chin.”

“You have a filthy mind Elfin,” he whispered with a cheeky grin.

“And ye might save yerself a climb on the ivy and jes come down the stairs Puck,” Joy called up.

Puck and I looked at each other with wide eyes and then burst into laughter.

§ § § § § § §

We trooped into the kitchen looking sheepish. The table was set for three and there was coffee, as well as a fresh loaf of Joy’s bread, Smoked Ashdown Forester, tomatoes and onions.

“I reckon it’ll be a fine day today,” Joy declared when we sat down. “There be some clouds out yet, but they’ll clear away afore noon, the sun she will shimper surelye.”

"Joy," I said, kind of worried. "We ..."

"Naun o' mine business," Joy shook her head. "I doant want to know."

Puck and I grinned at each other.

"Now if ye doant want the lad in yern room, kick him out. Could have been hisn room, howsumdever, the ungrateful rogue chose to live alikes a middling wodewose in the woods instead. Tis unaccountable. Tis yern room now Wenn, to share or naun. Jes remember there be a fine sack o' straw in the tool shed that suit Puck jes fine also."

"I'll keep it in mind," I said smiling.

"How were yern jaunce to the Sheeres?" Joy looked at Puck.

"Productive."

"Is this about the road protest?" I asked.

Puck gave Joy a questioning look. She nodded.

"Yes, it is." Puck answered.

"Ye'll know most there is to know afore the week be out Wenn," Joy said and I realised she had decided to let me join.

"Most?" I asked.

"She doesn't miss a thing, does she?" Puck asked Joy and I was pleased to hear pride in his voice.

"Far too clever by half," Joy agreed.

We could suddenly hear a mobile phone go off. It was strange to hear the electronic sounds in this setting, just as strange as watching Puck pull out a phone.

"Goodfellow here," he said.

I smiled; he was using a code name. So this is what he had meant with the cloak-and-dagger stuff.

"Okay, thank you." Puck punched a button and put the mobile down on the table.

“Well?” Joy asked.

“It’s begun,” Puck answered.

§ § § § § § §

“What has begun? Where? When? What are we going to do about it? Why did you use a code name?” I rattled off my questions as Puck and I left the Owlery about ten minutes later, heading east.

“It’s nothing dramatic yet,” Puck said. “We’ll just go have a look after we pick up Lady, see what is happening.”

“Yes Mr. Goodfellow,” I quipped.

Puck stopped for a moment. “Has Joy told you what we’re up against?”

“Lady Malheur.”

Puck continued walking and I followed suit.

“Road protests have been going on for a while now Wenn. There are detective agencies specialised in them. They scout the area, look for potential troublemakers, try to infiltrate groups, tap phone lines.”

“Tap phone lines?”

“Sounds farfetched, but we know landlines are tapped, we don’t know if they have access to the technology for intercepting mobile communication, but best to assume they have.”

“But there is not even a protest yet, so how do you know they are already...?”

“Because we know that Aunt Catt hired the services of one of those agencies two years ago when Friends of the Wyrde Woods was set up.”

“All that time!”

“Information is power, Wenn. That’s why we use the code names on the phone, but better not use them elsewhere okay?”

A brief flicker of irritation, that was all. I made it go away. There, I had been corrected without aiming a bazooka at someone. Achievement unlocked.

"Okay Puck, sorry."

"No worries. It's crazy how far they'll go really, hard to believe sometimes."

"So they're monitoring the Weard Hunt as well?"

"Oh you bet Wenn, those they consider far more dangerous. They are the ones who look like they'll be setting up a protest in the woods."

"Look like?" I was intrigued.

Puck grinned, "This is Top Secret, okay?"

"Sure."

"Might be stupid, my aunt might have sent you to spy on me."

"I get paid by the hour and bonuses for kissing," I answered. "I need the extra cash so you're in trouble mister."

"I'll gladly help you out there," Puck smiled happily. "Looking forward to it."

"See, putty in my hands," I said with satisfaction. "Now tell me all your secrets."

"All of the anti-road groups are connected," Puck said.

"Friends of the Wyrde Woods and Weard Hunt?"

"There are more."

"More!"

"Top Secret?" Puck looked concerned.

"I can keep a secret Puck, okay?"

"Friends is the most public group, and intentionally designed to keep a low profile where action is concerned. They are the folk who will appeal to the broader public."

"Pfff, if you think you can drag that public away from behind their tellies."

"You'd be surprised Wenn. Englishmen live quiet lives but touching something they care about is like waking a sleeping lion. Anyhow, that

public may admire but doesn't necessarily want to be associated with the more radical stuff."

Radical stuff. I liked the sound of that.

"And that would be Weard Hunt" I asked.

"Yes and no," Puck answered. "'Weard' is an old word for protect, defend. So the name suggests a kind of aggressive protection."

"Oh, and then the Wyrde Woods: The protection woods? How strange."

"No, 'Wyrde' with an 'e' at the end is the old word for 'word'. Then there is also Wyrd, without the 'e'."

"The Word Woods. All very weird," I laughed.

"Ask Joy about the Wyrd," Puck said. "The Highway Agency wants as little fuss as possible and this is a hugely controversial project already, what with a motorway being planned right through the Weald. So, we expect, that when things heat up, they'll swoop in and think of just about any reason they can to disable the Weard Hunt, cause that's the group they think will take the sort of direct action that will slow the work and get into the media."

"Why isn't there a camp already?" I asked, thinking of *Fierce Dancing*.

"Because they will try to get the camps evicted as soon as possible. And Aunt Catt, as landowner, is going to press that. Setting up camp now and having it evicted before the work starts gets us nowhere. It's when those chainsaws start tearing into trees that the newspaper and telly start to pay attention and that gets public attention. It can work you know, there are projects which have been stopped because politicians got cold feet."

"Okay," I nodded. "That makes sense. So will the Weard Hunt set up a camp?"

"Yes, they will do what the Highway Agency expects them to do. At some stage that involves setting up a camp."

"But they are a decoy," I guessed.

“Yup,” Puck said. “There is another group. You could almost say ‘professionals’. Some of them have been playing this game since the Newbury Bypass. They’ll build the real camp. One that will take days to evict so we get maximum attention which may or may not swing the tide of public opinion in our favour.”

“And you are part of this group?”

“Used to be. Remember, I said I got involved in local politics up north? That was a road protest.”

“So that’s why you went to Yorkshire?”

Puck nodded. “I am like a liaison between groups.”

“But not really a member?” I was intrigued, this was all much more secretive and well-organised than I expected. I thought we’d squat a farmhouse somewhere, wave banners, have a laugh, get into trouble with the law and after that I’d get back to being institutionalised. That was, till Joy had warned me it would be serious business. Puck was confirming this by filling in the details.

“There is a fourth group I am member of now,” Puck said. “But very few people know about that. The Highways Agency and, especially Aunt Catt, mustn’t find out about them. She may act like Sheere-folk and barely spend time here, but she knows the Wyrde Woods much better than we’d like.”

“It’s in her blood.”

“Yes,” Puck nodded. “The Wyrde Woods are in Malheur blood.”

“Who is in the fourth group?”

“You will meet them this week,” Puck said. “Now, about those bonuses you want to earn...”

He stopped and reached for me, folding his arms around my lower back and I grinned.

§ § § § § § §

The walk seemed to take forever and I realised I had never really walked the entire length of the woods before; my trips had always been incursions from the Owlery or some part around the woods or other and then back again. Joy had called those places the Edgelands and I liked the name because it suggested the Wyrde Woods was a centre of sorts. This time, I felt like I was travelling from within and it made me feel like less of an outsider. We passed through Roreford and crossed the Farisee Bridge where I stopped Puck for another kiss. I didn't explain it to him because I was afraid he would think it was silly but I liked the symbolism of kissing at the place where Sir Richard and Foster had last seen Niada. It made me feel that I had become part of the story now rather than a spectator.

We continued on our way and Puck being Puck launched into a cheerful folk ditty.

*Bees! Bees! Hark to your bees!
Hide from your neighbours as much as you please,
But all that has happened, to us you must tell,
Or else we will give you no honey to sell!
Marriage, birth or buryin',
News across the seas,
You must tell the Bees.
Or else they'll fly away.
Fly away — die away —
Dwindle down and leave you!*

We entered the edge of the broad stretch of oak woodlands, skirting Willick's cottage and from there walking to the towering Halfhollow Oak. We didn't linger there this time, though my fingers were itching because the oak so clearly invited a climb. We headed straight for the grim Blood Stone instead and then into the birch woods, halfway through which we took a right turn rather than following the path to the Carfax. The birch trees thinned out somewhat as the path dropped into a vale. Puck pointed out a whole line of magnolia trees two thirds up the other slope and said these were the offspring of magnolias planted by Oscar Malheur.

“These are late bloomers,” he said. “Few more weeks and all of them will be bright pink and it’ll smell like heaven here.”

Not long after reaching the top of that hill and walking down again we reached the Edgelands where the Wyrde Woods ended abruptly to be replaced by a coloured patchwork of fields surrounding a small farm house in the distance. I realised this was the agricultural enclave I had seen from the bus on my way to Carfax not long ago.

“Hornsby Farm,” Puck pointed at the farmhouse and as we crossed the fields on a public footpath I recalled Ellette Hornsby’s bravery in outwitting the Knucker. We were about halfway across the fields when a streak of black and white hurled towards us.

“Brace yourself” Puck grinned, just before he was almost knocked over by Lady who had taken a great big leap towards him. He caught her in his arms and she wagged her tail, licked his face, whined, wriggled herself loose and then assaulted me with her frolicking madness before rushing Puck again. We laughed.

“I guess she’s glad to see us,” Puck said happily.

Lady barked and kept up her excited greeting rituals for another good ten minutes as we approached the farmhouse.

A man had emerged from the main farmhouse, a long thatched brick building that was sagging with age and surrounded by ramshackle barns and sheds. I could smell manure and heard a cow mooing from behind one of the larger barns.

“How do Puck?” The man said. I looked at him curiously. He was in his forties; heavyset but his broad shoulders suggested quiet strength. He had an amiable open face and greying untidy long hair on top of which was perched a white cowboy hat which looked at odds with his grimy blue overalls and green wellingtons. I realised he was scrutinising me with his sparkling eyes just as I was him and we both grinned in recognition of this.

“Middling, how do Rob?” Puck answered. “Lady give you any trouble?”

"Naun, Lady be a fine dog," The farmer gave Lady a stroke over the head. She looked absurdly happy, tongue lolling out of her mouth and her eyes bright as she looked from one of us to the other.

"I am Wenn," I stuck out my hand.

"Rob Hornsby," He folded a great big hand around mine and for a moment I was afraid he'd crush it but he was surprisingly gentle. "So ye be Joy's lass, I've heard about ye."

"My lass too," Puck said shyly, placing his arm around my shoulder and I was so pleased I could have kissed him there and then. Rob raised an eyebrow and smiled.

"You're all much mistaken," I said cheekily. "I belong to myself. Free woman."

"I am not a number! I am a free man!" Puck laughed.

"Woman," I insisted.

"I will naun be pushed..." Rob began and he and Puck finished together: "...filed, stamped, indexed, briefed, debriefed or numbered!"

"I knew Puck was daft," I said. "But you too Mr. Hornsby?"

"I won't be druv; naun o' Sussex will be druv." Rob said. "Willick be saying ye had spirit lass. Ye'll need it with this scoundrel here. He be quite a handful."

"She'll cope. She's a changeling we reckon." Puck said.

"Lass mus be, no Sheere-folk could have charmed ye bunch o' wodewoses that quick." Rob nodded. "Well, we'll be needing all the help we can get, including Faere Folk. Ye be welcome here Wenn o' the Farisees."

He said that last in a strange formal manner and I smiled.

"Thank you Mr. Hornsby."

"Rob if ye please. Jes a farmer me."

"And an archer I heard," I said.

He brightened instantly, "Ye shoot?"

"She wants to learn," Puck supplied.

"Well, I can spare an hour. I'll get ye kitted out, so I will. I have a 35 pound hickory-boo bi-laminate somewhere, good for starting, and some 26 inch streales, looks about yern draw length, surelye." Rob rattled enthusiastically.

I had no idea what he had just said apart from the fact that he seemed eager to teach me how to shoot a bow and I nodded happily.

"Not today Rob," Puck said regretfully. "It's started. I got a call."

"Where?" Rob's smile vanished instantly.

"Lusty Giants, Pathfinders are out today."

Rob threw a glance at me and looked at Puck questioningly.

"She's alright, she's in."

"Well, they be bound to be starting. Got me Notice to Treat somewhen t'other-day."

"Your land too?" I asked, recalling the Compulsory Purchase law I had read about.

"We'd be standing right in middle o' the middling M33 now if it gwoan ahead," Rob nodded. "Leaving me nought but the old farm and a third o' mine fields."

He pointed along the driveway which ran from the farmyard to the A267 on a southerly course and I saw a clustered group of small grey buildings about halfway along.

"I am sorry," I said, not knowing what else to say. He had sounded pretty bitter about it and it seemed to me that it must be terrible to lose the lands you and your family had worked since the dawn of memory.

"Ye be heading out there?" Rob asked Puck.

"Yeah, we came to get Lady first."

"I'm sorry, but there be work here needs doing, I'd come with ye if there weren't. I can give ye a ride to the Earl's Barrel if ye want."

"That would be swell," Puck nodded.

"Well, the kit be in the house, ye'd better get it."

Puck nodded and walked away while I stood smiling and nodding as Rob enthused about a shooting competition he had attended in a language full of archery terms that was mostly Greek to me. Puck returned with a green satchel and then we bundled into Rob's Land Rover and drove off.

It was weird driving by the north side of Odesby. I could see the tenements of Neverland in the distance, a landscape which I knew as well as Puck knew the Wyrde Woods but which had never seemed so remote. From here they just looked like another bunch of ugly flats and I was glad when we hit the Nickleby road and left them behind.

§ § § § § § §

"Well, well, well," Joan stood by one of the tables in the Earl's Barrel which she had been wiping with a cloth and watched Puck, myself and Lady come through the door. The pub was empty but for her. "Young Puck and Wenn and Lady. On a regular day o' the week, playing truant naun doubt."

"It's half term," I said.

"Puck's been saying that for two years now, schooling be unaccountable different nowadays I reckon."

Puck grinned. "How do Joan?"

"I would be tussy and throw ye youngsters out o' mine establishment but unfortunately I be needing all the custom I can get," Joan winked. "Ye'll be wanting some lemonade surelye."

"Yes please," Puck answered. "Pint of Arundel Trident flavoured lemonade."

"Ye can have half a pint," Joan said, "To ease mine conscience and leave the door to heaven halfway opened at least. But set yerself down in the far corner jes in case. Pump Bottom Farmhouse for ye Wenn, if I recollects?"

I smiled and nodded.

Puck led me deeper into the pub than I had been before, taking me through a veritable maze of nooks and crannies. We sat down in an alcove, half concealed behind a supporting beam.

He took some coins out of his pocket.

"How do you get money?" I asked curiously, "You can't sign on yet."

"I plundered the savings account my father had set up for me before things went awry," Puck admitted. "Hypocritical isn't it? Turn my back on society but leech off it none-the-less."

I shrugged, if it was due to him it seemed no major transgression to me.

"I live very frugally though," Puck added, "Trying to make it last."

Well that I knew, having spent time at his hideout in the woods. Joan showed up with three half pints and sat down with us. She threw a quizzical look at me.

"Wenn knows, she's in," Puck said and I realised that Joan was one of our allies.

"Well, I suppose Goody Whitfield knows what be good," Joan said, "Naun offense Wenn, but I doant knows ye that well."

"None taken," I said quickly.

"Pathfinders," Joan looked at Puck, "Two pairs o' two. Parked at the Lusty Giants Visitor Centre and one pair o' them headed east into the Wyrde Woods."

It occurred to me that it might have been Joan who called Puck this morning.

"Okay," Puck said thoughtfully, taking his phone out. "Can you let the Hunt know? Wenn and I will deal with it today, but from tomorrow onwards we'll need folk out there every day. I'll tell Jukes and Tink."

Joan nodded, and emptied her glass.

"Ye can keep yern coins Puck, drinks be on the house," she said as she stood up.

"Bethanks Joan," Puck said, and then punched in a number on his phone.

"Goodfellow here," he said when someone answered. "Thunderbirds are Go."

He disconnected and looked at me.

"And so it begins," he said. "I am glad you're on my side Wenn."

I smiled, thrilled to bits with all the secrecy. So far, life didn't seem capable of being boring with Puck around.

§ § § § § § §

We lay on our bellies in the undergrowth on a low ridge peering at the path below; Arthur's Fort behind us and the Lusty Giants to our left. Two men were down there, wearing bright yellow coats. One carried what looked like a metal rucksack with an aerial attached to it and both were fussing over a tripod on which rested something that looked like a short stubbed telescope.

"Pathfinders?" I whispered to Puck. He nodded.

"Surveyors. That pack the one has got on his back is for satellite positioning, the thing on the tripod is a theodolite and they probably have a prisma reflector somewhere too."

"So they're taking measurements?"

"Very, very precise measurements. They are going to be mapping out the specific route."

"Shouldn't we go down and stop them?"

"Then they'll be back tomorrow with security and we will have only won one day."

Puck opened the satchel he had collected at Rob's farm and took out an Ordnance Survey Map and some markers as well as a pair of binoculars.

“Today is going to be dead boring Wenn. Observation only.”

I nodded, I was just happy to be in the woods. If Joy and Willick hadn't pulled off their latest stunt it would be a dead boring day at Nowhere Place today. Instead, I was free, the sun was shining and I was in the company of a boy in whose arms I had slept last night. Besides that, we were on a secret covert spying mission. I had never had it so good.

I looked at the map which Puck had carefully unfolded. It was incredibly detailed, showing the contours of the land, paths and many other Wyrde Woods landmarks which I hadn't found on maps elsewhere. I could see the Owlery and Willick's cottage marked, as well as the layout of Roreford and the Tuckersham Church. The Giant's Grove, the Blood Stone and the Shy Maidens were present as well. The abundant patches of green on the map even indicated if the woodlands were coniferous, deciduous or a combination of the two.

“So, tell me.” I whispered. “What do we observe?”

Puck was just scribbling the date and day in the top left hand corner of the map with a red marker.

“Different colour tomorrow,” he grinned. He handed me the binoculars and pointed down at the path. One of the men was bending over the tripod which stood on a patch of grass just off the path; the other had walked ahead carrying some other sci-fi implement.

“Find the man with the theodolite,” Puck said softly.

I looked through the binoculars, they were good, when I found the theodolite bloke I couldn't even get all of him in my sights at once, just half, and the details were incredibly sharp.

“Got him,” I told Puck.

“Good, now look around the legs of the tripods. Probably dead centre.”

I moved the binoculars by a fraction too much and was suddenly examining the leaves of some shrubs, but I found my target again and checked out the tripod's feet.

“What do you see?” Puck asked.

“There’s something sticking out of the ground. Brownish, I think it’s some sort of metal.”

“Bingo!” Puck said happily and I lowered the binoculars.

Puck let the marker hover over the map. “Do you reckon that’s about the spot of the metal rod you saw?”

“Fraction of an inch to the left,” I suggested. Puck marked the spot. “What is it?”

“Base station. They also call them triangulation pillars. There’s a concrete foundation block beneath it. They usually leave them above ground, but with controversial road works they bury the blocks below the earth. They buried these here about two years ago. There will be one every three hundred feet or so.”

“What do they do?”

“The surveyors use them as a base to take measurements from. Without these measurements the construction chaps with the chainsaws and bulldozers have no idea where to go.” He was grinning from ear to ear now, fully in his element.

“So if we can stop them...”

“They’ll have to start all over again. So what we do today is mark every base station they measure from so we know where to find them later. The Weard Hunt will join us tomorrow so we can send two teams out and follow both sets of pathfinders about.”

I nodded, Puck’s glee was contagious and it really sounded like he knew what he was doing. This road protesting business was promising to be interesting and I was glad the Wyrde Woods had committed defenders.

Contrary to Puck’s warning I didn’t find the day boring. There was a certain monotony to it because the surveyors and our little team kept on repeating the same action but there was a definite thrill too. Every time the Pathfinders had finished their measurements at one base station and moved on to find

the next, Puck, Lady and I had to move through the forest without being seen. Lady was under strict 'heel' instructions and behaved impeccably.

I was enjoying myself, I felt like a hunter stalking prey and I sensed that Puck was quietly content. I suppose that after years of preparation it must be something of a relief for him to finally get to the practical execution of the plans. The Hornsby farm satchel included a bottle of water and biscuits so every now and then we treated ourselves to refreshments.

The surveyors stopped their work around fivish and trailed back in the direction of the Lusty Giants. We took the path over Arthur's Fort to get back to Nickleby. It was remarkable how different the area on the other side of the summit was, it had dried out and we had none of the difficulties I had encountered when I had first climbed Arthur's Fort.

Puck entered the Earl's Barrel through a side door as there were a fair number of cars on the car park and we emerged in the pub's kitchen where we could hear the buzz and laughter from the pub itself. We handed over the map to Joan for safekeeping and then caught the bus back to the Owlery.

Joy was curious as to how we had managed and I regaled our adventures in excited detail whilst Puck nodded and looked pleased with himself. To my relief he made no attempt to head back to his hideout and came up the stairs with me at bedtime as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Perhaps it was, I reflected as I snuggled into his arms, I could get used to this.

SUSSEX WUN'T BE DRUV

Escape from Neverland and ***Dance into the Wyrde*** form a two part series about the 'Wyrde Woods', a woodlands setting in the Sussex Weald. The genre is Magical Realism. The setting is fictional but parts of it may seem familiar. The splendour of a bluebell carpet. The dance of swallows over wheat fields. The song of a nightingale on a warm summer's eve, the chittering of playful badger cubs and, of course, a pook or two.

Enter Wenn Twyner, one of the unwanted, the refuse of modern society, who escapes an urban nightmare to find solace in the timeless Wyrde Woods. Add a handful of quaint locals who seem to have stepped out of another century as well as a diverse local community prepared to defend the rich natural bounty of Sussex against a Medusa of co-operate interests intent on its destruction for a quick profit and our tale can begin.

Escape from Neverland has a strong 'finding home' theme. ***Dance into the Wyrde*** concerns the possible destruction of that home and the decision to defend it at all costs, come what may. Both books are available as E-Book on Kindle but also as paperback. It has no shelf-presence as of yet but can be ordered from most major retailers but also your local independent bookstore, and the latter deserve all the support they can get.

In order to walk his talk, the author has pledged 50% of his royalties for ***Escape from Neverland*** to a barn owl sanctuary and 50% of his royalties for ***Dance into the Wyrde*** to LAMBS for their work in opposing the Mayfields building plans in Sussex.

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