

The Wyrde Woods Chronicles

LORD OF THE WYRDE WOODS

BOOK TWO

DANCE INTO THE WYRD

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This book is dedicated to

Marguerita Bär

Thank you for trusting me

*It made a whole world
of difference to me.*

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Prologue

It's late and I wonder and ponder and doubt if I should continue to write all of this down. Joan and Rob said I should. It's been seven years already since that fateful summer and memories can fade fast they said.

It was a struggle at first because there were so many things I had tried to banish from my thoughts over the years but once I got started it was like opening a flood-gate; it all came back in vivid detail. Some of it painful but moments of triumph and delight as well.

So far there were surprises too. Living in Nowhere Place (the Odesby Juvenile Care Home) in the run-down Neverland Estate was not something I had been looking forward to recalling because of the terrible things that happened there. However, there were nice moments too; being mates with Sharon and Biggs for one. Small victories also when we managed to outsmart the system or the really big ones when Joy and Willick came out of the Wyrde Woods pretending to be my grandparents and whisked me away to freedom not once but twice.

The Wyrde Woods were far harder to bring to life again. Recalling those first meetings with Willick, Joy and Puck, remembering the warmth and laughter, the stories and the songs, the first explorations of the woods, experiencing a home for the first time in my life...those first kisses...it all filled me with wonder again. But the pleasant memories are bittersweet too because I now know it was all borrowed time. We were already living under the shadows of Malheur Hall even if we didn't know it at the time.

Sometimes the sense of loss is overwhelming. I'm not sure if I can do the next part. I'm not sure if I can stand to go back to that heart of darkness in our tale. I'm not sure if I can stay away from it either, not now that the memories come flooding back and I search for answers.

My dear sweet Puck, what have they done to you my love?

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 theirn young babe Foster and follows Niada, catching up with hern and pleading and begging, holding up the liddle chavvee and axing hern 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 hern 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 hern disappeared and Sir Richard naun ever sees hisn love again. Tis said Niada visited Foster thrice, but hern 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 hisn 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, surelye," 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!"

§ § § § § § §

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 said enthusiastically.

"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 crazy? Drove her to disappear in the Wyrd 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.

§ § § § § § §

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.

"Cccchhhhhwwaaaaaaa!" 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 vlothered, ready to defend yernself alikes a bagga, scrowing at me, snuffy and tussy. Should I be afeared 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 sayerd 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 tussy 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 tussy 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 theirn 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.

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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.