

CHAPTER 3

The Weald ~ The same day

Merrow, woodgoblin seedkeeper of the Weald, scraped a crusty patch of fungus from the sapling's periderm, the light outer bark on the druid woodgoblin's stick-like trunk. "Oh dear," he grumbled to himself, fearing the worst.

If the seed failed to thrive, the Honorable Order of Druids would come to an end. Caring for the seeds, which would become the balance holders of the Wilden Lands, was his life's work. His charges, the woodgoblins chosen to become druids, were anointed by the Creature God to keep evil in check and balanced with the good of all creatures.

His mind returned to when the troll princess arrived with the seed. It had suffered damage from a trip through a poisoned forest and an errant curse. She was young and impetuous, not coming to the Weald immediately. She'd lingered to save her kingdom and her father from the Erlking's nefarious hold. Her mentor, Master Kryk, had made it far too

easy for the girl to choose which was more important to her. She'd chosen her kingdom over the safety of the entire Wilden Lands.

"Such is the folly of youth. Fickle to the roots," Merrow spoke out loud. He was used to talking to himself or talking to the roods—the dead druid spirits that lived in the trees. Merrow understood why she did what she did, but her actions made his work much more complicated.

He placed a hand on the ancient Yew tree in the center of the garden and closed his eyes, seeking his old friend, Woodsly. Though he hadn't taken up his final resting place in one of the Yew trees, he was nearby.

"It had to be done. I had to use some of my energy to help keep her safe." Woodsly's ghostly voice traveled up the tree and into Merrow's mind. "I trained Princess Horra on all things she'd need to know, just in case. But her father had coddled her after her mother died. Possibly rightly so, since her mother's dying wish had impaired her. What she needed was experience, something you can't train into a warrior. She was bound to go headfirst into emotional reactions. She got my seed here before it was too late. Have no fear, my friend, it will survive. I sense his life force strengthening. In the end, the troll princess will help this new druid find his way around the world. She will become a magnificent leader one day."

Merrow patted the tree trunk. "One day, perhaps," he agreed. "Until then, we are all at the mercy of a small troll girl to keep the darkness at bay long enough for us to complete our mission."

Murmurs rumbled from the ground—the roods speaking to one another of more curses and danger throughout the Wilden Lands. Merrow hobbled over to a wooden bench and planted himself on it with a heavy sigh. Arthritis made his roots swell and his limbs creak.

Darkness was creeping across the land too swiftly. It would

take weeks at the least to unroot the seedling. Then he could start his druid training. But the Erlking could do much damage in that time. They, he and Woodsly, had been far too unprepared for the dark elf's arrival, thinking they had more time before he came.

If only the first plague hadn't taken so many of his kind—the Seventeen Wise Men of the Yew Order. Merrow stared off into the canopy of leaves above him. He was the only one left. Fourteen had fallen to the first Erlking's plague. One had died in the War of the Warts. The last, Woodsly, was the one that grieved Merrow the most. They'd come from the same forest and had shared a childhood before entering the Order. His death by this, the second Erlking's hand, had been especially shocking.

“Do the elves know malevolence grows at their border, invading the lands they once ruled?” he asked the tree spirits. “Surely their Sylvan Counsel knows. Where else would the dark elf have come from if not from Endwyld?”

Hints of agreement traveled along the roots. He wasn't the only one to think so. The elves had joined the old viken wizards, drawing up an impenetrable wall of magic spells. Because of their combined powerful magics, no one knew for sure what to believe. None of the roods could penetrate their complicated shield that went deeper than roots could grow. They had cut themselves off from the rest of the Wilden Lands as promised.

“*It's unconscionable for them to have created the Riven,*” came the voice of a long-dead elder.

“*He could be a murderer,*” spoke another of the older roods eagerly, referring to one of Sylvan Counsel's seven unpardonable sins. “*Or he uses dark magic.*”

“Aye, we know he does from his use of music magic.” Merrow frowned at the obvious answer. Some roods were well

over four hundred years old in their spiritual form and were losing their sharpness. It was only a matter of time for some to forget altogether who they were and leave their Yew tree behind for their heavenly home. That, among other reasons, made Merrow anxious about ancient knowledge disappearing before the next druid came into power.

Merrow shook his leaves, discarding the thoughts and worries of which he had no control. His cane tapped as he made his way back over to the sapling. He only had one job, something he'd dreamed of since he was a sprout—growing and training the next druid warrior.

Glimmerbugs danced around Merrow's leaves as he rubbed tingleroot paste to the area on the trunk he'd just scraped. The sapling moved.

Merrow clapped his stick-like hands. "That's it, my boy! Wake up!"

A breeze born of the land's gladness rippled through the giant old Yew trees that made up the Weald. Roods exclaimed in joy. Whimsy birds sang and bobbed the long feathers on their tails. Hope, in the form of sunlight, sparkled down on the rocky path around the garden. The ancient protection symbols etched into the path and on the trees glowed and hummed.

The sapling moved again, as if stretching, and his eyes opened and blinked. He let out his first clackity croak. With shaking limbs, Merrow held the bottle of lifesap to the lips of the newborn druid, and it suckled. Sap seeped out of the corners of his splintered mouth as he dragged in deep gulps of the liquid.

"I shall name you Rowan." Merrow wiped away the excess sap.

When Rowan finished, he slept. Merrow was almost certain Rowan visibly grew before his eyes, though it could just be his own eagerness. Light-green buds spread across the

youngster's reddish crown. The thin periderm on his trunk had thickened and darkened from a taupe to a nice chestnut color.

The color of life.

"Thank the Creature God. It won't be long now, my boy." Pleased, Merrow took the bottle and refilled it. Rowan would need to eat every two hours now until he had grown enough to unroot. Normally it took weeks of careful tending, but Rowan hadn't sprouted as expected, so it might take longer.

Merrow didn't mind. He'd been waiting two generations to be the Master Seedkeeper to the next druidborn. With four hundred and ninety rings under his bark, he was more than ready for the challenge.

After Rowan unrooted, they'd immediately begin their training. With the Erlking on the move, there wasn't time to spare.

There was only so fast a sapling would grow, though, even in the best of circumstances. Merrow prayed for a miracle.