

The Seedling

Dawn shone across the plain on the sleepy looking village. However, the little town was very alive with activity. There were so many preparations yet to be made this early spring day. Today was the day of the festival. A time all the villagers looked forward to, after the harsh winters and before the hard work of true spring, of celebration and optimism for the harvest later in the year, the Apple Blessing Rite.

Vala was assisting her mother in the kitchen. Flour dusted the female's dainty paws as she finished yet another loaf of bread. Her whiskers twitched slightly as she grinned. Her great tail flicked once behind the squirrel maiden, pleased with herself.

Her mother noticed the gesture and reached out to tweak her daughter's tail. Gytha grinned at Vala's indignant squeak. "Imp! Sure, ye've a right t'be pleased wif yersel', but we've got more bakin' t'do yet. Save th'merry mood of yourn fer later an' th'festival."

Vala sighed and bowed her head. "Aye, Mum, I shall." Her usual good humor returned swiftly and soon she was humming under her breath as she worked. She deftly moved the peel to pull the loaves from the oven and replaced them with dough. She slid the freshly baked bread onto a cooling area and handed the cooled loaves to her mother.

The older female carved the crusty bread into thick slices. Some of these she spread butter on, the rest she set before the hearth to toast. She looked up in mild irritation. "Th' tother womenfolk should be 'ere already," she murmured.

Chuckling as she put ingredients together for another loaf, Vala said, "'Tis still early, Mum. 'Tothers will be by soon enough."

The kitchen door opened before the young squirrel finished speaking and several females of varying ages entered. More than one sniffed appreciatively. “Ooo, Gytha, tha’ smells fair ‘eavenly!”

“Aye, we’ve been bakin’ long afore th’ moon set an’ the sun wasna e’en a ‘int in th’ sky,” Gytha replied. “Most o’ th’ smells are thanks t’ me gel ‘ere,” she said with pride, clasping Vala’s shoulder. The younger female bowed her head demurely, feeling as though she glowed with the praise.

“An’ Blythe, ye ‘ave th’ twine?” Gytha asked, turning to the toast.

“Acourse I ‘ave,” Blythe said, holding up a few large balls. “Think these’ll be enough?”

“They’ll do, lass, they’ll do,” another older squirrel said. Mala sat her ample frame at the table. “C’ mon, then, let’s get t’ it. We don’ ‘ave all morn.”

The other females all followed the elder’s example. Gytha placed the large platter of toast on the table and offered buttered bread to everyone. They ate as they attached loops of twine to the toast, chattering away, catching up on gossip, whiskers and tails twitching as they worked.

Vala was quiet, working on her dough. She listened with half an ear, throwing in her opinion as she felt, but keeping to herself. It was nearing midmorning when she slid the latest platter of toast on the table. “Think this’ll be enough?” she asked.

Mala sniffed as she looked at the large baskets of toast and twine. “I suppose it’ll do,” she said.

Vala nodded toward the tiny window. “Th’ sun be fair up now. ‘Tis time t’ be puttin’ these up.”

Everyone noted the position of the sun. “Aye, so ‘tis,” Gytha said, standing. The other females nodded as they too rose to their feet. Vala quickly dusted off her hands and wiped them to rid herself of flour. Then she took one of the many baskets.

Mala led the way to the orchard, being the eldest. Their numbers swelled as other villagers joined them. They wound their way through the dormant orchard, to the Tree. The Tree was the largest apple tree in the orchard, rumored to be oldest tree on the plain and progenitor to all the trees in the orchard.

Under the Tree, more of the villagers had gathered. Large casks laid out by the trunk were opened. A warm, spicy scent wafted from them. Vala inhaled deeply to fill her lungs with the odor, that of fresh cider. The young female grinned as Mala raised her basket over her head, eliciting a cheer.

The villagers all pressed forward, scrabbling for the baskets of toast. Vala laughed as she passed out her toast to eager hands. The toast was dunked into the casks of cider then hung from the branches of the Tree. A festive mood filled the air as the squirrels chattered to each other, pointing out empty branches, encouraging the pups scrabbling up the Tree to hang the toast from the upper limbs.

In very little time, the toast was gone and the Tree was well adorned. Alden, a strong male of middle years, raised his paws into the air for attention. “Th’ toast offering be ‘ung. Lunch’ll be in th’ orchard whilst we wait fer th’ birds.”

Lunch was a picnic affair under the bare branches of the orchard. Several young males maneuvered the cider casks to the picnickers, great tails flicking behind them as they struggled with the heavy, unwieldy burden.

The meal was an enjoyable time, neighbors sharing their best recipes for the occasion. Vala munched away, idly noticing how Alden meandered through the

gathering. Suddenly Bray, a young pup of no more than five summers, squeaked and jumped up, whiskers twitching like mad with excitement. “Th’robins are comin’!” he squeaked, pointing with a stubby paw.

Sure enough, a single robin could be seen perched on a lower branch of the great Tree. The villagers chattered more excitedly as they watched as one, then two, then four robins flew to the Tree to partake of the cider soaked toast.

Vala was as enraptured as the rest when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked up to find Alden with her and her mother. He smiled benignly at them. “‘Ave ye seen th’Wise One?” he asked softly. “She’s usually ‘ereabouts by now.”

Gytha shuddered. “Nay, I’ve no’ seen th’old ‘ag.”

“Mum, tha’ ‘tweren’t fair of ye,” she chided gently.

Alden nodded. “Tha’s right, miss,” he said. “She be deservin’ o’ our respects an’ all. ‘Ave ye seen ‘er, then?”

Vala shook her head apologetically. “Nay, I ‘aven’t.”

He sighed as he looked over the gathering. “‘Tis an odd thin’, ‘er no’ bein’ ‘ere. She knew t’day was th’Rite.” He looked back down at the female. “Would ye go an’ see iffen ye can find ‘er?”

“Ye want me t’look fer ‘er? Why me?” Vala stammered in surprise.

The older male shifted his weight in embarrassment. “‘Tothers be afeared o’ th’Wise One. Ye don’ seem t’be and iffen my memory be right, ye are a swift runner.”

She looked to her mother, who slowly nodded. “Ye be a quick’un. Yer as good a choice as th’next.”

The young female hesitantly got to her feet “I’ll be sure t’ ‘urry,” Vala said.

Alden sighed in relief. “Thank ye. Th’ Wise One usually be found on th’ path through yon trees,” he said, following the path with his paw.

Obediently, Vala trekked through the gathering and orchard. The sounds of merrymaking soon faded as she moved into a lope. The trees grew thicker as they became a full forest. The young female was struck by how eerily quiet it was. She shook off her discomfort. The sooner she found the Wise One, the sooner she could rejoin the festival.

The scent of fire caught her attention. Vala slowed her pace and followed her nose. In a clearing not far from the path, she found a campfire. But her gaze was held by the squirrel that tended to it. The Wise One, an old female with a long, snowy pelt, was a figure that drew attention and respect. Symbols were painted all over her pelt and beads and feathers were braided into her long hair.

“You can come closer, child, I’m not going to eat you,” the Wise One said, startling Vala.

The young female moved into the clearing, sitting opposite the Wise One. “I know ye aren’t,” she said.

The Wise One opened her eyes and fixed her gaze on the squirrel before her. “You are not afraid of me,” she said, her voice thready with age.

Vala shook her head. “Nay, I’m no’ afeared. I was jus’ no’ wantin’ t’ disturb ye.”

The Wise One stared at her before she nodded. “You aren’t disturbing me. What can I do for you?”

Vala cocked her head. “T’day be the Apple Blessin’ Rite, Wise One. I was sen’ t’ find ye.”

The old female stared uncomprehendingly for a few moments before she heaved herself up. “Aye, that is today.”

Immediately, Vala went to assist the white female. “C’mon, Wise One, ye can lean on me iffen ye like.”

“Thank you kindly, child, but I will be fine,” the older female said, gathering up her things, finishing by picking up a walking stick. “And, my name is Carling. You’d be the baker’s youngest daughter, Vala, correct?”

Surprised, she replied, “Aye, Wise One, tha’ be me.”

“I may be old, but my memory usually still works. And call me Carling,” she chuckled.

Vala smiled shyly. “Aye, Wise--Carling, I will.”

Carling looked at the female from the corner of her eyes. “Why are you not afraid of me like the others are?” she asked.

“I’ve go’ nae reason t’be afeared o’ ye, Wi--Carling,” she replied. “Ye be th’Wise One. Th’Blessor o’ th’Plains. Ye look out fer us.”

Chuckling, Carling nodded. “Aye, true. But the others seem to think I’ll turn them into a toadstool or some such.”

Vala smiled in chagrin. “They be simple folks, superstitious, th’lot o’ them. I never unnerstood why they thought tha’.”

She shrugged. “Folks make up explanations for things they don’t understand. It makes them feel better.”

Vala shook her head sadly. “Tha’ could be it. Sometimes I wonder abou’ th’folks, always carryin’ on about sommat or ‘tother, when it truly dun matter.” Carling eyed her for a moment before turning her attention back to the path.

The ancient female surprised Vala. Carling moved with sprightly grace that belied her years. She thought that they would not be back before afternoon but they soon neared the festival. A cheer broke out as the revelers noticed the pair.

“Would you assist me today, child?” Carling whispered as she nodded to everyone.

Vala blinked. “Ye wan’ me t’ ‘elp? Wha’ can I do fer ye?”

She chuckled. “Just fetch me things I need.”

The female caught sight of her mother, who wore a relieved yet concerned expression, and gulped. What would her mother think? But if the Wise One wanted help, who was she to turn her down? “I’ll do wha’ I can fer ye, Wise One.”

Patting her hand, Carling murmured, “Excellent. You’re faster than I. Get a cask of the best cider brought up to the Tree with a hand trowel and a mug.”

Though she twitched her whiskers in confusion, Vala hurried off. The cask had already been set aside, along with the trowel and mug. It was easy enough to get them moved. Carling nodded in approval. “Thank you, child. Mind the cask and mug for me, will you?” As she was already by the cask, Vala nodded.

The Wise One leaned on her stick as she looked up at the Tree, a small smile hovering by her mouth. “The robins are certainly enjoying the offering,” she said dryly. Most of the toast had already been picked off, leaving the twine. The branches were full of robins warbling happily at their repast.

Abruptly, Carling stood up straight and tall, her eyes clearing, her snowy pelt ruffled by an unseen breeze. The villagers fell silent as they watched the Wise One of the Plains begin the Apple Blessing Rite.

The old squirrel closed her eyes once again as she ran her hand over the trunk of the Tree. She grinned, flashing her incisors briefly. “The Tree is happy, echoed by the robins,” she said. “The spirit of the Tree is pleased.”

She turned, set down her stick, and picked up the hand trowel. She knelt on the ground with astonishing grace and began chanting under her breath as she dug. A few moments later she had part of a root exposed. She lovingly cleared the dirt away and held her hand out to Vala. The young squirrel dipped the mug into the cider and handed it to Carling. The Wise One flicked her tail once in approval before she poured the cider onto the root. She chanted a bit louder as she caressed the root, encouraging it to absorb the cider.

For a brief moment, Vala thought she saw the root swell and glow. She blinked and the root was precisely the same as it was before. She shook her head to clear it and turned to watch Carling as the Wise One rose and moved, still chanting.

Carling repeated her ministrations of the roots at all four cardinal points. Partway through the Rite, her chanting altered to a soft tune. She sang to the Tree, almost a lullaby. Vala began to hum along, causing more than one villager to twitch their whiskers in surprise or consternation. She did not notice, her attention was held by the Wise One.

After the roots were anointed, Carling rose again. She ran her hands across the rough trunk of the Tree, caressing it. Abruptly, she took up her walking stick and struck the Tree soundly. The robins, startled, took wing with indignant squawks. The Wise One raised her hand to the flock. “The spirit of the Tree goes with them,” she said. “Now comes the time for the Others, the dark spirits who seek our ruin, loving all chaos.

Link arms now,” she commanded the villagers. “Circle the Tree, protect her. Chant the wards like I taught you, while I battle the dark ones.”

Obediently, the villagers linked their arms and circled the Tree. As they began chanting, Carling closed her eyes, leaning heavily on her stick. Vala stood unsure of what she was to do. The Wise One asked for her help, but the anointing was done. Was she to join the circle? In her indecision, she stayed where she was.

She blinked. To her, it appeared as if the day suddenly grew much darker. The villagers were still chanting, but the sounds seemed to slow and fade. Soon it was as if only herself, the Tree, and Carling were the only things on the Plains. If she listened hard, she could still make out the chanting. Frowning in confusion, she looked back to the Wise One.

The old squirrel was still bent over her stick, her face a mask of concentration. Vala knew better than to break anyone’s focus. She stayed where she was, as her vision grew darker. Soon, she could barely make out the Tree. Only Carling, with her white pelt, was visible.

The young female shifted her weight nervously from foot to foot. She did not like the surreal atmosphere. She longed to understand what was happening. But she did not want to disturb the Blessor of the Plains while she was in the middle of the Rite.

Carling’s face suddenly contorted in pain and she fell to her knees heavily with a groan. Vala instantly leapt to her side and reached down to help the older female up. The Wise One opened her eyes and bared her teeth with startling ferocity. “Do not touch me!”

Vala blinked in amazement. “I was only tryin’ t’ ‘elp ye.”

Shaking her head vigorously, Carling gasped, “You don’t understand. You can’t touch me while I’m pitting myself against the Others.”

“Why no’?” she asked stubbornly. She was mildly surprised at herself. In this place, she seemed freer, she was not inhibited by her mother or the village. Had she been back in the village, she would never have spoken thusly to the Wise One.

Carling did not seem to notice this change. “If you touch me, you will be binding yourself to me and me to you. Our wills will combine and I can’t promise we’ll become ourselves again.”

Vala stared at the Wise One. “Can ye defeat th’ ‘Tothers wi’ out me ‘elp?”

Groaning, Carling shut her eyes. “They are powerful this year. There’s almost too many of them.”

Holding out her hand, Vala stood straighter. “Th’ village’s welfare be more import’t than I. Iffen we bind an’ canna unbind, so be it.”

Carling slowly lifted her head to study the young female. She raised her hand then paused. “You understand? There’s no going back.”

Vala smiled serenely. “I be more sure o’ this than I be about anythin’.”

With a crooked grin, the older squirrel grasped Vala’s outstretched hand. Instantly, the young female lost her sense of self. She blinked and saw everything differently. She could see the Tree, she could make out the villagers, but she could see strange, writhing shapes beyond the villagers. Rage boiled through her. They had to be the Others. She would not let them work their mischief on her village! She spat a series of words at the shapes. The Others groaned wordlessly, then dissipated.

Abruptly, her vision cleared. The day was as bright as ever and the villagers were still chanting. Vala found herself still holding onto Carling, the older squirrel looking at

her in surprise. The young squirrel understood then. She and the Wise One did bind and became something else. They banished the Others together.

Carling rose slowly to her feet. “I’m getting too old for this,” she murmured. Flicking her tail in approval, she said, “Even before you touched me, you were at that place.”

Vala nodded carefully, suddenly feeling drained. “Aye, I was. That’s never happened before.”

Chuckling, the Wise One said, “I suspect not. But it shows you’ve got the knack.”

With a sigh, Vala shook her head. “That may be true, but I’m still just the baker’s daughter.”

Twitching her whiskers with a scowl, Carling turned to the villagers and held up her hands. They halted their chanting and waited in a hush for the Wise One to speak. The white female, said, “The dark spirits have been banished once again! The apple crop should be a good one!”

Before the villagers could cheer, she pierced them all with a steely gaze. “The spirits have chosen another to be the next Wise One of the Plains!” Carling grasped Vala’s shoulder. “This will be my new apprentice, to be my successor when my time comes upon me!”

Vala was just as shocked as the villagers. “Me? The next Wise One? But...why me?” she stammered.

As the villagers broke out chattering in response, Carling turned a sly smile to her. “You’ve been chosen, child. I’ve needed an apprentice for some time now. You came to me when I was contemplating who to take.”

Vala shook her head. "I just happened to be available to get you."

Unperturbed, Carling continued, "You have the mark." She grabbed the younger female's arm and turned her hand up, revealing fur as snowy as her own.

"I must have gotten this when I touched you in that place," she said, rubbing at her new fur.

Nodding, the Wise One said, "You have the tongue. Have you noticed how you've been speaking?"

Frowning, Vala, still staring at her white paw, said absently, "How do you mean?"

Carling chuckled. "Like that, child. You've lost the vernacular of the village." The young female said nothing, staring back at the Wise One with a haunted expression. "And you have the knack, the understanding beyond the village's day to day existence."

"But, I'm just the baker's daughter!" she cried. "Why me?"

She snorted. "I was just the thatcher's daughter. The Wise One before me was the beekeeper's daughter. Why does being the baker's daughter make you any less worthy than the others? Child," Carling said, her voice gentle. "The spirits chose you. They are the ones that paint us differently, white, so that all will know us on sight. The Tree approves of you, otherwise you would not have been to that place."

Vala rubbed at her palm, still mesmerized by the change in color. "I don't know."

She patted the female's shoulder. "No one can make you be the Wise One. You have to accept it yourself."

Still rubbing her palm, Vala pondered. Could she be a Wise One? Could she shake off everyday worries and take on other, more mysterious ones? Could she live

without a single village to call home, belonging to all yet none? She looked up and caught sight of her mother. Could Vala leave her family?

She knew this was a momentous decision. Stay in the village, sheltered against the world? Or live freely under the open sky, reaching upwards for more?

Put like that, there was only one choice. She smiled faintly as she turned to Carling, knowing she was making the right decision.