



THE MOONSHAE TRILOGY BOOK TWO

BLACK WIZARDS

DOUGLAS NILES



A DRUID OF MYRLOCH VALE

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Let's go swimming now! Can't we, Robyn? It's so hot, and we've been working so hard. . . ."

"You mean *I've* been working so hard!" said the young woman, pausing to push a sweat-soaked strand of black hair back from her face. "All you've done is get in the way!"

Her companion, a two-foot-long orange dragon that buzzed like a hummingbird around her, turned his scaly snout away in momentary indignation.

"Besides, Newt," Robyn continued, "I've got to sort out this tangle of vines before we do anything else. They seem to grow thicker every day! I don't know how Genna tended this entire grove by herself." Once again, she pried the vines away from the trunk with a heavy stick, grasping one and pulling it free from the ground. She tossed the vine onto a pile of its fellows, destined for an evening fire.

"Why do you have to sort these stupid old vines anyway?" the dragon sulked. "Let them grow the way they want to—and let us go swimming the way we want to."

"I've told you a hundred times, Newt. This is the sacred grove of the Great Druid of Gwynneth, and she is training me in the ways of our order. Part of my training is to obey her instructions and to aid in caring for the grove."

The explanation sounded a little hollow even to Robyn, who had, for nearly a year, dutifully followed the instructions of her aunt and

pinning him against the tree. A short, wriggling stretch of red tail and a tiny, clawed foot stuck from the tangle of vines.

“That serves you right!” she chided him as she began to pull the vines from the tree once again. “You should pay attention to what you’re doing.”

Newt finally forced his head from the tangle and shook it quickly. “That’s the last time I try to help you,” he huffed as he crawled free. Flexing his gossamer wings, he buzzed into the air and hovered before her.

“Why don’t you just use your magic on these vines and be done with the job?” he asked, eyeing the tree belligerently.

“The tending of the grove is a matter for a druid’s hands and heart,” replied Robyn, reciting one of her lessons. “The grove is the source of her magic, and thus cannot be maintained with it, or the magic would lose its potency.”

“I should think it would be very boring to do all these studies and silly jobs, day after day, forever and ever. Don’t you miss Tristan? And don’t you ever want to go home?”

Robyn caught her breath sharply, for the questions were painful ones. She had come to the Vale nearly a year before and had had no contact with her previous home. Genna insisted that such diligence was the only way Robyn could properly develop her skills. She thought carefully before answering, more for her own benefit than Newt’s.

“I miss him very much—more, each day, it seems. And I want to be with him. Perhaps, someday, I will be. But for now, I must learn what I can of the order of the druids—find out for myself if I am destined to serve, as my mother did and my aunt does, as a druid of the isles. This is something I have to do, and if Genna tells me that the only way I will learn is by performing mundane tasks around her grove, then so be it.”

“Of course,” Newt said nonchalantly. “Tristan’s probably got plenty to do at Caer Corwell, anyway. Festivals and hunts . . . all those pretty country lasses and barmaids. I don’t imagine for a minute that a prince of the Ffolk would waste his hot summer afternoons in a cool alehouse, of course, but just supposing he. . . .”

“Oh, shut up!” exclaimed Robyn, more harshly than she intended. Newt had an uncanny ability to aggravate her.

