

Chapter 1

I watch the old man sitting on the stone, chewing on dry twigs in the morning sun. I put my water jug down for a moment and nudge my friend Moss. “Something’s going to happen.”

“What? The mistletoe will just make him vomit as usual.”

I cover my mouth to suppress a snort of laughter. Before he sees me I snatch up the jug and link my free arm through Moss’s, practically dragging her out of the old man’s earshot. “Seriously, Moss – he’ll turn you into a frog if he hears you say stuff like that.”

“Why? It’s true, isn’t it? Anyway, I’ve never seen him turn anyone into a frog, even when he says he’s going to.”

“He could, though. He just doesn’t want to waste his power.”

“Ooh, listen to you! Why do you care? Whatever old man Crow does, it won’t affect us!”

I grin at her. “Tell me that again when you’re a frog!”

Something makes me look back at Crow sitting on the stone. I see a shimmer in the air around him and I’m sure he’s staring at me. Can he hear us, even at this distance?

“Come on, let’s get this over with,” I say. “Race you to the river.”

“Run? What for? Anyway, my mother told me never to run with a water jug.”

I blink at her in mock amazement. “Since when did you listen to your mother?”

Poking her in the ribs, I run like wildfire down the hill, jumping over boulders and anthills, avoiding the patches of marshy ground that would suck my feet down in stinky mud and make me lose my balance. Skidding to a halt at the riverbank, just

managing to stop myself falling in, I turn around. Moss is still close to the top, just starting to pick her way carefully down the hillside.

She's so slow, I can't be bothered to wait for her. Instead I make my way along the riverbank, following the trail through the scented gorse and heather, past the clumps of dank reeds to the quiet river pool beyond the waterfall. Here the water runs shallow and it's easier to walk in to fill our waters jugs, and wash ourselves. Wading out into the centre, I listen to the sounds of the morning, the distant thunder of the waterfall upstream and the chorus of birdsong filling the air. Moss is taking forever to get here. Why is she always so cautious?

As I dip the lip of the jug in the flowing stream, I suddenly stop and listen. I *knew* it! Something is happening. Even the birds have fallen silent. The smell of leaf mould reaches me on the faint breeze and I stare warily into the ancient trees on the other side of the river. A cloud covers the sun, making it hard to see clearly into the dark of the wood. Then my skin prickles at a sound of crunching leaf litter, the dragging sound of something heavy moving across the forest floor. The scent of dense forest is now almost overpowering.

I stay rooted to the spot, standing in the cold water. All I can see is the ash, oak, and thorn of the woodland and in the dark cool beneath them, a scattering of late bluebells. Then my eyes are drawn to a movement, a pattern forming in the canopy of a great oak. Gradually my eyes adjust and I make out the shape of a great green head, as big as the oak crown itself, a thing with a face of leaves that blends with its background, as if the spirit of the forest has come alive. My chest feels so tight, I can scarcely breathe.

The leaves flutter as a pair of vast, shimmering, spring-green eyes take form and stare at me. Each gold-flecked eye is as big as the stone in the village old man Crow sits on. I feel strangely calm.

Beneath the eyes, a mouth shape made of tree branches appears, and I hear something that sounds like the wind has been given a voice hissing through leaves.

Tell the old one you see me here. Disaster comes soon, and it is time.

“Time?” I’m so awestruck, my voice is just a whisper.

He will know. Return alone and we shall speak of it more.

The words echo in my ears as the great head blends back into the canopy and there is no longer anything to see but the great oak, and a haze of fluttering leaves where the creature had been. The silence is broken with the call of the reed warbler, the blackbird, the mew of the golden eagle overhead. The sun reappears from behind the cloud and I blink in the sunlight.

‘What on earth are you doing just standing there staring at the trees? And why didn’t you wait for me?’ Moss is annoyed.

‘There was something there, in the woods!’

‘Don’t you start! It’s bad enough having our mothers trying to scare us with stories of the great wyrm that will eat us if we enter the woodland alone. It’s nonsense, Bracken, you know it is. They make up stories to stop us straying too far.’ Moss wades into the river with her jug and splashes water at me, laughing when I gasp with the shock of the cold.

I want to tell her more, but hold back. The wyrm said to tell Crow, not blab about it to my friend. So I grin and splash Moss back. Soon a full-on water fight is underway, and after a lot of shrieking and laughing, we’re both soaked.

It warms my heart to have fun splashing about in the river with Moss, but deep down, I'm worried that the encounter I've just had has changed everything. Life won't stay the same from now on. Mam warned me from the time I could first talk, never to speak of the strange things I see that other people don't. So I don't, not even to Moss. Mam isn't going to like it. I've seen the great wyrm, and I have to tell Crow. Change is coming.