

# The Mark of Fire



Hannah LeBlond

# Chapter One

## The Day that Changed Everything



“ouch!”

It was just one of those irritating days when every little thing seemed to go wrong. Molly sucked her finger where she had pricked it with her sewing needle. With her other hand, she lifted her embroidery hoop and stared bitterly down at the flower pattern she was supposed to be stitching; it definitely looked more like a blob of intestines than a rose, as Richard had said. She couldn't have cared less if it weren't for the fact that Grandmither would make her do it over until it was perfect. Feeling resentful at the thought, Molly glared at the rocker beside the fireplace, where her frizzy-haired, saggy-skinned, yellowed-toothed, hairy-warted Grandmither snored.

Cursing under her breath, Molly wiped her ginger hair off her sweaty forehead as if she were wiping the mounting tension out of her mind. Today was the day of the decision—the decision that would change her life forever. And she was powerless to do anything about it, forced to wait in a stuffy little room with Grandmither and her racing heart.

She glanced up at the clock on the mantle, wondering if at this very moment Mamma was putting in Molly's application at the

manor for a position as a scullery maid. Now that she had completed basic schooling, and was nearly sixteen-years-old, Molly knew she needed to have an income to help support the family. And though the thought of working as a scullery maid for the rest of her life seemed dismal, it sounded loads better than the other option of being sent to work in a factory in America.

Biting her lip nervously as the flood of worries resumed with a vengeance, Molly jabbed her needle back into the fabric and pulled it through with a fierce jerk.

*Pop.*

“Sod it,” hissed Molly as the thread snapped. She fumbled in the sewing box for the spool of same-colored thread and scissors. Her fingers were trembling slightly as she rethreaded the needle; she had better start thinking of something pleasant, lest the churning feeling in her stomach make her vomit all over her embroidery.

In her daydreams she imagined she actually *was* in America, but on a grand stage performing the lead in a musical before huge audiences who applauded her enthusiastically.

A few weeks ago, she had gathered up her courage to present this idea to her family as a legitimate option of what to do with her.

“Lord, that’ll be the day!” her father had laughed. “Wouldn’t make any money unless you got to the top too. And how long would that take? How much money would it cost to work your way there? Not to mention it doesn’t sound like a *real* job to me.”

“And what theater would take *you* in?” Grandmither’s croaking voice had sneered. “How can you hope to sing and dance with asthma like yours?”

But it was her brother Jamie’s counsel that had been the worst.

“Besides, I’ve heard Irish immigrants are oppressed in America. Quite miserably, I’m told. They’ll never let a pathetic little red-headed, freckled Irish girl on the stage! But don’t worry, when you go to work in a factory, you’ll just be oppressed anyway, so it doesn’t matter if you’re Irish or not.”

Thus Molly’s last hope and deepest desire were crushed, leaving her to painfully await the decision for one of two very bad fates.

Grandmither snorted loudly in her sleep. Molly wiped the perspiration from her head again. She was going to pass out soon if she didn’t get some fresh air. She peered at Grandmither over the top of her stitching; she certainly seemed in a very deep sleep. Maybe—

*Tap, tap, tap.*

As she jumped in fright, the embroidery hoop dropped out of Molly’s hands and Grandmither snorted again, louder this time; Molly froze, grimacing as she waited for the explosion of yelling, but Grandmither merely smacked her gums and resumed snoring.

“Whew.” Molly let out her breath and turned to see what had caused the tapping.

At the window across the room from her, a large falcon perched on the sill. The moment she looked at it, the falcon tapped its beak against the glass again.

“Bruce?” Molly whispered, surprised. The falcon had lived in the tree right outside the Connolly house for as long as Molly could remember. Though he was not a *pet* by any means, she and her younger brother had christened him “Bruce” in honor of an old Scottish hero, which highly irritated their proud Irish grandmither, a great bonus to choosing the name.

Though Bruce could always be found near the house, he had never come to the window before.

*Tap, tap, tap.*

And he certainly had never *knocked* on the window before.

Curious, Molly set aside her sewing and tiptoed to the window. Bruce cocked his head back and forth as Molly cautiously pushed open one side of the window so as to avoid knocking Bruce off the sill.

Immediately, the falcon hopped over to the open side and gazed up at her with big black eyes.

“Are you all right there, Bruce?” Molly whispered.

Bruce cocked his head and twittered softly, still staring up at her with those dark eyes. An odd tingling sensation ran down Molly’s spine; it almost felt as if the falcon were trying to tell her something.

Blinking, Molly shook her head to clear it. What a ridiculous idea. But Bruce *was* acting very oddly. Maybe he was ill?

Slowly, Molly reached out her hand toward him; Bruce kept twitching his head but did not back away.

“Hey,” said Molly gently, her fingertips almost brushing his feathers. “What is it, boy? Are you hurt?”

The falcon chirped, fluttered off the sill to the ground below, looked back at her, hopped a few feet away, and looked back again.

Molly’s stomach did a little backflip.

Bruce wanted her to *follow* him...

**BANG!**

The front door crashed open. Molly nearly jumped a foot in the air; Grandmither sat bolt upright with a scream, and to Molly’s aggravation, Bruce took flight.

“Jamie!” Molly cried at her older brother, who stood in the doorway rubbing his belly.

“Lunch break,” he said, ignorant of the disturbance he had caused.

“Careless boy!” snarled Grandmither, snorting and choking with incredible drama. “Didn’t think twice about nearly knocking the door straight off its hinges, did you? And now look what you’ve done!”

Molly—for the first time in her entire life—slightly agreed with Grandmither.

“Sorry, Grandmither,” yawned Jamie, sauntering toward the kitchen, his long, gangly arms flapping at his side. To Molly, Jamie looked like an overgrown scarecrow; he even had hair highly resembling straw.

“Molly, make me something to eat,” he droned from the kitchen.

“Make it yourself.”

The door burst open again, and Grandmither let out an exasperated scream, followed by a shouted threat: “STOP BANGING THAT DOOR OR I’LL TAKE MY CANE TO YOUR BUTTOCKS!”

“You’ll have to catch me first,” sang Richard, a scrawny fourteen-year-old boy with hazel eyes and hair matching Jamie’s. Richard was Molly’s annoying younger brother and best friend.

“And shut that door before I catch my death of cold!” Grandmither snapped, banging her cane warningly on the floor.

“We wouldn’t want that to happen,” muttered Richard. He closed the door, paused, and then wrenched it open once more. “Och! Are you crazy? It’s roasting in here!”

Grandmither howled.

“Molly,” whined Jamie, coming back from the kitchen, “there’s nothing for lunch.”

“I am *not* your servant!”

Molly could feel her temper rising rapidly. She was in no mood for this, what with her tense nerves. Throwing a nasty glance at Jamie, she stomped out the still-open door, ignoring Grandmither’s command to “come back at once, young lady!”

The air outside, though rather warm, felt refreshingly cool after the sauna of the room. Molly’s temper cooled with it as she followed the earthen path around the side of the house to the large oak tree that grew beside it. Feeling a deep sense of freedom and satisfaction, Molly took a running leap toward the tree and grasped hold of one of the knobs protruding from its trunk. With the ease of someone who had done it hundreds of times, she scurried up the lower branches until she reached her favorite spot near the top. Here, Molly had a perfect view of the sloping hill that led down to the potato field, where she could see her father plowing. Beyond that, a cluster of buildings and a tall church steeple in the distant village peeked between the trees.

A cool wind fluttered through the leaves of the tree, blowing her flame-colored hair off her face and calming her anxiety.

What would Mamma and Pappa decide to do? Would she get that job at the manor? If not, what was going to happen to her?

A shadow fell across her, and she glanced up to see Bruce land on a nearby branch. The falcon chirped, clacking his beak excitedly.

Molly caught her breath; she had momentarily forgotten about him—but he had obviously not forgotten whatever it was that he was trying to communicate to her.

She climbed her way toward him as Bruce fluttered down

several branches. She moved closer, but he hopped further away. Molly's heart was beginning to pound with excitement. The dread of her future pushed aside with curiosity, Molly clambered and swung herself to the ground and landed in a crouch. Almost as if he sensed her eagerness, Bruce spread his wings and took flight, gliding slowly, just higher than her head, leading her away from the house and gardens.

"Hey, Molly!"

Molly whirled around, heart pounding, to see Richard striding up the path toward her. Bruce hovered in midair for a second, gave a screech, and then soared away.

"No!" Molly cried, slapping her hand to her forehead in exasperation.

"No, what?" said Richard, approaching her. "What was Bruce doing? He looked rather odd."

"He was trying to show me something till Jamie, and now *you*, frightened him off!"

Richard's eyes widened.

"You're talking to birds now, then, eh? And I've always defended your sanity."

"Gah!" Molly waved Richard off and stormed further down the path, toward the chicken coop. Richard followed close in tow.

"You know," he said, "you could consider asking me what I was doing out here, since the answer is that I came to find you because *we* used to be friends and all, before you replaced me with that feathered fiend. But that's all right, I don't harbor ill feelings toward you—"

"All right, all right," said Molly, smiling in spite of herself; Richard always seemed to be able to snap her out of bad moods. Besides, though she would never admit it, he was probably right

that she was off her rocker in imagining Bruce was *leading* her anywhere. Obviously the stress of life was getting the better of her. She awkwardly tried to hide her blushing cheeks behind her hair and quickly changed the subject.

“So, what’s going on at the house?”

Richard shrugged.

“Grandmither’s jabbering at Jamie. Jamie finally made himself lunch—” Richard cleared his throat “—also known as slicing himself a piece of bread. I put your embroidery on his chair—”

Molly gasped.

“Wait—the needle was still in it!”

“Oh, yes, I know. Sadly he caught me at it and tried to murder me with the butter knife. So I decided it was a good idea to come and talk with you instead.”

Sniggering, Molly grabbed a pitchfork that was leaning against the coop.

“So you really didn’t come out here to see me at all? Just to hide from Jamie?”

“There are upsides to every situation.” Richard smiled sneakily.

“Aye, and your upside can be helping me muck out this lot. Grab the wheelbarrow,” said Molly tersely, as she mentally searched for an upside of being shipped off with a bunch of unwanted Irish immigrants to a smelly factory in New York.

“Boring creatures,” Richard said, his nose wrinkled, as Molly unlatched the chicken coop door and entered. She stabbed her pitchfork into a pile of soiled straw and tossed it into the wheelbarrow.

“Richard, move that wheelbarrow a little closer, will you—*Richard!*”

Molly ducked as a chicken went zooming through the air, squawking madly, feathers flying.

“That was grand!” said Richard, his fists raised in a cheer. “A little problem with the landing—supposed to land on the feet not the head—”

“What are you doing?” Molly snickered.

“Chicken hurling competition!” he said cheerily, seizing another terrified chicken from the flock of clucking, fluttering hens. “Fetch one for yourself!” He heaved the chicken into the air with all his might. “And a beautiful belly-up soar for the speckled gray!”

But Molly wasn’t listening. She barely saw the mass of gray feathers whoosh past her face as she caught sight of a solitary figure striding slowly up the path toward the house. Her stomach swooped as though she’d just missed a step.

“Mamma’s home,” she said quietly.

Richard paused mid-throw of his third chicken and turned to look, his face pale.

“It’s rather late, isn’t it?”

Swallowing convulsively, Molly nodded. Everything inside her wanted to run to Mamma and find out what had happened at the manor, but she was far too frightened to do so. Had her application been accepted, her one chance of not being sent off to a factory?

“Er—let’s er,” Richard cleared his throat nervously, “let’s finish this mess.” He grabbed the other pitchfork and dug it viciously into the muck.

Molly followed suit. They worked in silence, tossing loads of horrid-smelling straw into the wheelbarrow, which Richard dumped out in a pile behind the coop each time it filled to

capacity. The sun sank behind the hills until nothing but a pale evening glow lit the chicken coop.

Richard let out a groan.

“Och, look who’s coming to inspect our work.”

Molly glanced up to see the dark form of Jamie loping along the garden fence in their direction.

“Hope for his sake he still doesn’t have that butter knife, ‘cause my pitchfork can reach a whole lot farther,” sneered Richard, chucking another pile toward the wheelbarrow, just as Jamie reached the doorway.

“What are you two doing—arrrrgh!” He leapt back as the large pitchfork-load of muck landed on his boots.

“Whoops,” said Richard innocently. “Overshot the wheelbarrow.”

“I just cleaned these yesterday!” Jamie growled, rubbing his boots together to try and get the filth off.

“What’re you doing out here?” asked Molly irritably.

Jamie shot her a nasty glare.

“I don’t have to answer to you, lassie, considering I’m the *oldest* and this farm is as good as *mine*.” His eyes narrowed cruelly. “Which is a whole lot more than I can say for you.”

Molly stabbed the pitchfork into the ground, her stomach twisting in knots.

“And what are you meaning by that, then?”

Jamie crossed his arms and tilted his head with a revoltingly smug expression.

“Nothing. Just I don’t reckon you’ll be around for much longer.”

The sickening, gut-twisting sensation in her stomach was

causing Molly's fury to rise at an accelerated rate. Her clenched fists were shaking at her sides.

Richard leapt in front of Jamie, his eyes flashing.

"You'd better clear off before I feel like using my slingshot!"

"Don't you threaten me!"

"What are you gonna do? Hit me with a butter knife?"

"Anyway," Jamie continued, ignoring Richard, "it's justice! I'm sick of you two ganging up on me all the time! And Molly, you're useless. What else is Father gonna do with a stupid, useless *girl*? 'Bout time you started doing something other than wasting space—"

But Molly had had enough. Temper past danger point, she leapt at Jamie and sent her fist flying into his jaw. Jamie staggered back with a cry; he bumped the back of his knee against the wheelbarrow and tumbled backwards, feet in the air, sending several chickens fluttering away in fright. Molly didn't wait to watch any more—she fled from the coop as quickly as her legs could carry her, knowing Jamie would be after her in a moment and mad as a hornet.

Dinner that evening was a somber affair. Molly didn't feel very hungry; her stomach kept churning unpleasantly. After receiving a lengthy lecture from Father about her temper, Molly had been told she would be splitting Jamie's chores with him for the next month.

"Eat your supper there, Molly," said Father, between bites of bread.

"I'm not hungry."

"You should be grateful that we have food. Your mother and I work very hard to provide for you. Eat."

Knowing his words were an intentional reminder of their financial reasons for her unknown, upcoming fate, Molly took a shaky spoonful of stew, though she barely tasted it. Father didn't seem to care that Mamma was not eating either; she sat silently beside him, staring down at her bowl, her nut brown hair gently framing her beautiful face, which presently was pale and strained. The sight made Molly sicker.

On the other hand, Grandmither happily gobbled down several bowls of stew, humming tonelessly and smiling wickedly every time she caught Molly's eye.

"The vegetable garden is certainly flourishing this year," said Jamie casually, massaging the purple bruise on his chin; Molly smirked in satisfaction.

"Indeed, it's been very plentiful," agreed Father.

Across the table, Molly saw Richard roll his eyes.

"Elbow off the table, Richard," said Mamma.

He grunted.

The rest of the evening passed in such intense and awkward silence that Molly couldn't stand it. Desperate to escape, she climbed into bed long before anyone else. When Mamma came in an hour later to kiss her, Jamie, and Richard goodnight, Molly pretended to be asleep.

"Sleep well, my loves," Mamma said, closing the door behind her as she left.

But sleep evaded Molly. She lay awake for some time, staring at the ceiling, and listening to Jamie snoring and Richard rolling over in his sleep. Silver moonlight crept across the floor as the clouds shifted.

Richard moaned, the wind whistled past the window, and a low, familiar droning rumbled through the house...

Molly sat up, listening intently past Jamie's loud snores. The rumble rose and fell, and her stomach did a backflip as she realized what it was—voices talking.

Her parents talking about *her*.

Heart racing, Molly fought the urge to eavesdrop for several strained minutes before giving up; she couldn't stand it—this was *her* future, *her* life being decided upon.

Trying not to make a sound, Molly crept out of bed, pulled on her boots and coat, crossed to the window, and unlatched the lock. It creaked slightly as she pushed it open. A rush of cold air blew against her face. She glanced back to make sure she hadn't woken Jamie or Richard, and then as quietly as possible, pulled herself up onto the sill, swung her legs round, and jumped to the grassy ground below.

The wind was chilly. She shivered as she turned to close up the window, her hair wildly flying around her face, her coat flapping like a sail. The blades of grass on the hills rolled creepily in the wind like black ocean waves. With determination, Molly hurried along the side of the house and peered around the corner. As she had hoped, the window to the living room was not properly shut all the way, and she could hear her parents' voices drifting through the crack.

Something rustled behind her. Molly whirled around on the spot—heart leaping—to find Richard standing behind her.

“Richard!” she hissed, waving her hand at him to motion for him to go away. To her annoyance, he merely came closer.

“What are you doing?” he whispered.

Molly glared at him.

“Eavesdropping on Mamma and Father. I want to know

what's going to happen to me! Shouldn't I have the right to know? It's my li—"

"Och, shut your gob, I'm not arguing with you," Richard said, putting a finger to his mouth to shush her. "But since I'm your brother, I have a right to know too."

"Fine," muttered Molly. Though she would never admit it, she was thankful he was with her.

Crouching, she led the way along the side of the house. When they reached the window, Molly pressed herself against the wall and peered cautiously around the edge of the window to look inside.

Low embers were glowing in the fireplace on the other side of the room, casting a shadowed orange light on Mamma's and Father's faces. They were sitting across from each other at the tea table, just a few feet from the window. Even in the semidarkness, Molly could see the tears glimmering in Mamma's hazel eyes as she sat rigidly, hands clasped on the table in front of her. Father was rubbing his forehead as though it ached. Neither was speaking, but Grandmither's croaky voice was jabbering away from somewhere out of sight.

"...better stop whining and get used to it. We all knew this day would come, so what's all the blubbering for?"

"Get used to it?" Mamma choked, wiping her cheeks furiously. "I can't believe you'd do this behind my back, Malcolm!"

"Unless something changes, we don't have a choice, Mae," said Father in a gloomy voice.

"Nothing is going to change," Grandmither snorted. "It's a simple matter—there's no job for her at the manor, and we cannot afford to keep her. Molly is worthless to us. She can't make any money here, and she can't do housework to save her own life!

Therefore she has no choice but to be sent to work in a big city, and New York is as good as any.”

It felt as though the ground had dropped out from under Molly. She could hear Richard’s sharp intake of breath.

Mamma let out a giant sob, and Grandmither scoffed.

“Mother, please leave the room,” said Father, his tone angry now. “This is Mae’s and my decision, and we do not need your opinions.”

“I can’t stand such emotion! It’s simply embarrassing,” sniffed Grandmither coldly.

“Then get out!” snarled Father.

“Och, someone needs to be thinking practically!” Grandmither said haughtily, and then Molly heard her footsteps shuffling away, followed by the slam of a door.

“Malcolm—Malcolm, why didn’t you tell me you’d done this?” Mamma whispered tearfully.

Father sighed.

“Like I said, if nothing changes we won’t have a choice, Mae. I don’t like it any more than you do, but parents all over the country are sending their children to America in search of jobs. This is 1910, the world has changed. Resources are scarce here. We can’t afford her anymore. It’s just the way it is. This ticket to New York isn’t for another two months, we have time to try to adjust.”

Mamma let out a moan of agony.

“This is your mother’s influence on you! She is p-pushing you because sh-she h-hates Molly!” Mamma hiccuped loudly, wiping at the tears streaking down her cheeks.

“My mother is emotionally unstable, I never said otherwise,” Father agreed. “But it wasn’t because she pushed me, Mae. It’s because there is nothing else we can do.” He reached across the

table to pat Mamma's hand, but she jerked it away and covered her eyes, sobs quietly shaking her shoulders.

"My p-poor daughter, my poor b-baby girl. I—I never thought this w-would really h-happen..."

"We don't have another choice," said Father heavily. "We—we have to let her go."

A shudder rippled through Mamma. She shook her head slowly from side to side, tears streaming down her face.

Pappa let out his breath and rose to pull Mamma into his arms.

She'd heard enough. Turning away, Molly crawled the length of the house. The moment she was out of sight of the window, she ran as fast as her legs could carry her, not even noticing where. Finally, heart pounding, a painful stitch in her chest, asthma constricting her lungs, Molly collapsed in the grass some distance from the farm.

The moon cast long dark shadows across the rocky hills. She clenched her fists into tight balls around clumps of dirt in the grass, wheezing heavily, willing herself not to cry. She couldn't fall apart—in order to survive this, she had to be strong.

But she wasn't. The only things she could feel were great disappointment and fear. Maybe resignation, but certainly not courage. Angrily, she pounded a fist on the ground, and something gave a soft chirp.

Gasping in surprise, Molly lifted her head to find Bruce perched on a rock a few feet away, watching her. He cocked his head and clacked his beak.

"Hello, Bruce, haven't had much success with me today, have you?" Molly wheezed, her chest tight from asthma. Closing her eyes, she tried to focus on slowly inhaling and exhaling—

Something hard and scaly brushed her knuckles, and Molly jerked back her hand with a start. Bruce had crossed the distance between them and now stood peering up at her with beady, black eyes. One of his yellow, clawed feet was extended toward her.

Molly stared in confusion for a moment before she saw it—something white was clutched in his talons.

Tremblingly, she stretched out her hand, palm upward, and Bruce opened his claws above it. A tiny piece of tattered parchment fell out. Molly caught it and gently smoothed it open. There were elegantly-scripted words written upon it in bright green ink:

*Follow the falcon—he knows the way.*

Molly's stomach swooshed sickeningly.

*What?*

Once again Bruce was twittering and cocking his head as he watched her.

“Follow the falcon...” Molly read aloud, head spinning. Who could possibly have written this? Follow the falcon where? Was this note even for her? Was it a joke? It simply didn't make any sense...

“Molly!”

Jumping in surprise, Molly looked round to see Richard striding across the moonlit meadow. Bruce screeched angrily at the interruption.

“There you are. What are you do—OCH! *Get off!*”

Out of nowhere, Bruce had suddenly flown at Richard's head, screeching, flapping, and clawing. Richard covered his face with his arms.

“Molly, *get him off me!*”

“Bruce!” Molly exclaimed in shock, lunging at the rampaging falcon. After much smacking and dodging on Molly and

Richard's part, Bruce gave up and landed on the rock a few feet away, still chattering furiously at Richard.

"What's got into him?" Richard said, glaring fiercely at Bruce.

"I—I think you're interrupting him," Molly said timidly. "It might have to do with this." She held out the note to Richard, who took it with a curious raise of his eyebrow.

"W-where did you get this?" he asked sharply, looking up at her.

"Bruce gave it to me," Molly replied nervously, aware of how ridiculous it sounded. "I have no idea where it came from."

Richard glanced back at the little scrap of parchment.

"Do you think it's some mean trick of Jamie's?"

"Jamie's not clever enough to come up with an idea like that, and even if he was, how could he get Bruce to give it to me?"

"That's a point right there, but—but—" Richard stuttered, his wide hazel eyes reflecting the silvery moonlight "—Molly, are you really gonna just *follow* Bruce?"

Molly bit her lip and looked away. Her heart thumped heavily against her chest. It was probably crazy and useless to try—she was silly even considering it—but once she left Ireland, she would never have the chance again. And she knew it would haunt her forever. Besides, if she was going to be shipped away, what had she got to lose? Being sent to a loony hospital might be a better fate.

"Aye, I'm gonna go with Bruce," she said. "Nothing may come of it, I know, but I'll always wonder what would have happened if I don't try now. This might be my only chance!" She looked imploringly at Richard, wanting him to understand. He was her only friend—she didn't want him, at least, to think she was crazy.

Mouth dangling, eyes unblinking, Richard nodded slowly in a dumbstruck sort of way.

“That’s not dramatic or anything,” he muttered, and then heaved a huge sigh. “Fine, I’ll come. But don’t say I didn’t tell you so when something bad happens.”

A shiver of excitement ran down Molly’s spine. Turning back toward the falcon, who was watching them keenly, Molly nodded.

“All right, Bruce, show me.”

As if he understood English, Bruce gave a sharp screech, spread his wings, and lifted himself into the air.

The falcon flew just out of arms’ reach, slow enough for them to keep up, a black silhouette against the moonlit sky. Further and further he led them, away from the farm and the village, to a rather wild-looking, hilly area Molly had never been to before.

“We’re going up *that*?” Richard groaned as Bruce glided up a particularly steep slope. But he plunged after the falcon, a good pace faster than Molly, who began lagging behind because of her asthma. The hillside was slippery from the smooth grass, and covered with heather, brush, and large jagged rocks. The darkness made the ascent even more difficult. Molly yelled aloud in frustration when she accidentally grabbed a thorn for support. But the little message hidden in her pocket propelled her on.

At last, dirty and disheveled, she and Richard crested the top of the slope to find themselves in a rolling, moonlit meadow.

“If I’d known what was involved in this expedition I’d have opted out!” panted Richard, wiping his brow. Bruce, who didn’t seem to care about their tiring journey, was already soaring away across the dark field.

“Demanding little tosser, isn’t he?” muttered Richard.

“Wait!” Molly called, wheezing from exertion and hurrying after the falcon, with Richard close behind.

She stopped short—causing Richard to nearly crash into her—as Bruce suddenly turned and swooped into the branches of an enormous tree, which was silhouetted black as night against the moon. The falcon settled himself comfortably on a thick, low-hanging branch, twittering happily. Apparently this massive tree was what he had wanted her to see.

Richard peered at Molly through the darkness.

“*Please* don’t tell me we climbed all this way to see a sodding tree?”

Feeling nervous and slightly ridiculous, Molly walked toward it. She recognized it as a rowan tree, though she had never seen one this large before. Craggy and gnarled, its branches thick and twisted, the rowan looked as if it had been growing there for thousands of years. What caught her attention, however, were the crimson leaves, fluttering like millions of little rubies in the wind. How in this dim lighting were they so brightly red? And why were they red at all? It was July—shouldn’t the trees be in the height of their summer green? Molly scanned the ground, thinking perhaps the rowan was dying and losing its leaves, but to her surprise, there wasn’t a single leaf anywhere to be found except on the branches.

“Curious,” Molly whispered.

“What?” said Richard dully, looking bored and disappointed.

Bruce gave a soft screech, his glittering eyes reflecting the moon.

“This is interesting and all, Bruce, but I dunno what you want me to do,” Molly said, grabbing a knot on the trunk for balance as she leaned back to look up at the falcon—

The trunk rippled beneath her hand.

“Och!”

Molly jerked her hand back, staring wildly at the spot she had just been touching. It rippled again, like a wave on a lake, and before she had time to think, the entire surface of the tree starting moving as if it were made of water, rolling fluidly up and down the trunk.

Richard cried out, and Molly staggered backward in alarm. With a loud creaking noise, an undulating part of the tree began pulling itself away from the rest.

Catching her foot on a rock, Molly stumbled and fell heavily onto the grass, but still did not take her eyes off the dark, writhing figure now detaching itself entirely from the tree trunk. Richard was swearing loudly from somewhere out of sight.

The tree fell suddenly quiet and solid again. But now, standing beside it, was a tall, twiggy, gnarly creature. Its eyes glinted in the darkness as it spoke in the deep voice of a man.

“I am Druic, the guardian of the Rowan. You are in luck—the passageway is open.”

