

Once
there
were
Willow Woods.

Prologue



nce there were wildwoods.

The Wizards had lived in the wildwoods for as long as anyone could remember, and they were intending to live there forever, along with all the other Magic things.

Until the Warriors came. The Warriors invaded from across the seas, and although they had no Magic, they brought a new weapon that they called IRON . . . *and iron was the only thing that Magic would not work on.*

From that moment on, Wizards and Warriors were fighting each other to the death in the wildwoods.

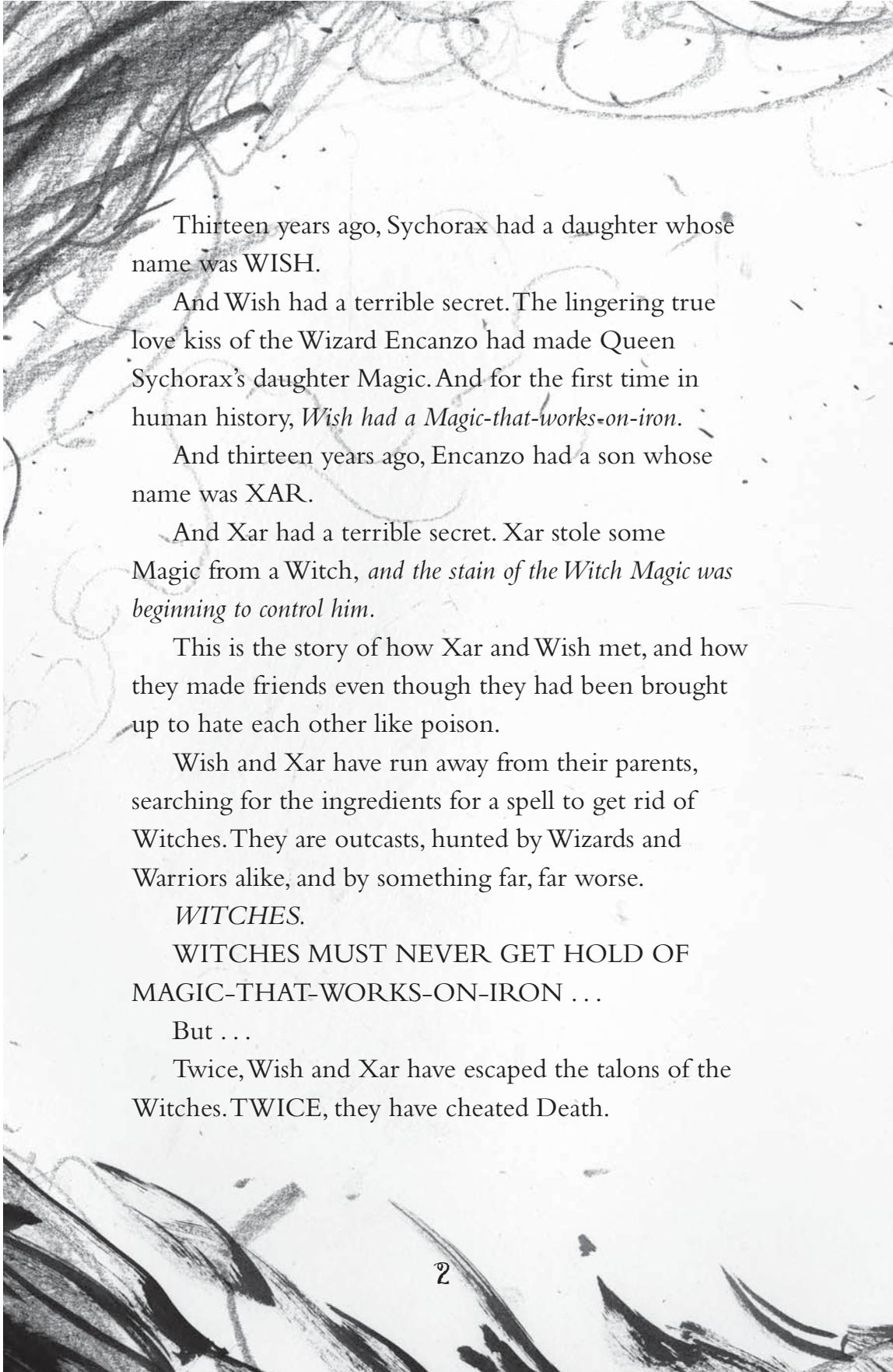
Until one day . . .

A young Warrior queen called SYCHORAX fell in love with a young Wizard king called ENCANZO. Wizards and Warriors should NEVER fall in love. So Sychorax had taken the Spell of Love Denied to make her love die. And the love had died indeed . . . and Sychorax had married a Warrior, like she was supposed to.

And Encanzo had married a Wizard, just as a Wizard should.

So the danger of a curse ought to have been avoided.

But . . .



Thirteen years ago, Sychorax had a daughter whose name was WISH.

And Wish had a terrible secret. The lingering true love kiss of the Wizard Encanzo had made Queen Sychorax's daughter Magic. And for the first time in human history, *Wish had a Magic-that-works-on-iron.*

And thirteen years ago, Encanzo had a son whose name was XAR.

And Xar had a terrible secret. Xar stole some Magic from a Witch, *and the stain of the Witch Magic was beginning to control him.*

This is the story of how Xar and Wish met, and how they made friends even though they had been brought up to hate each other like poison.

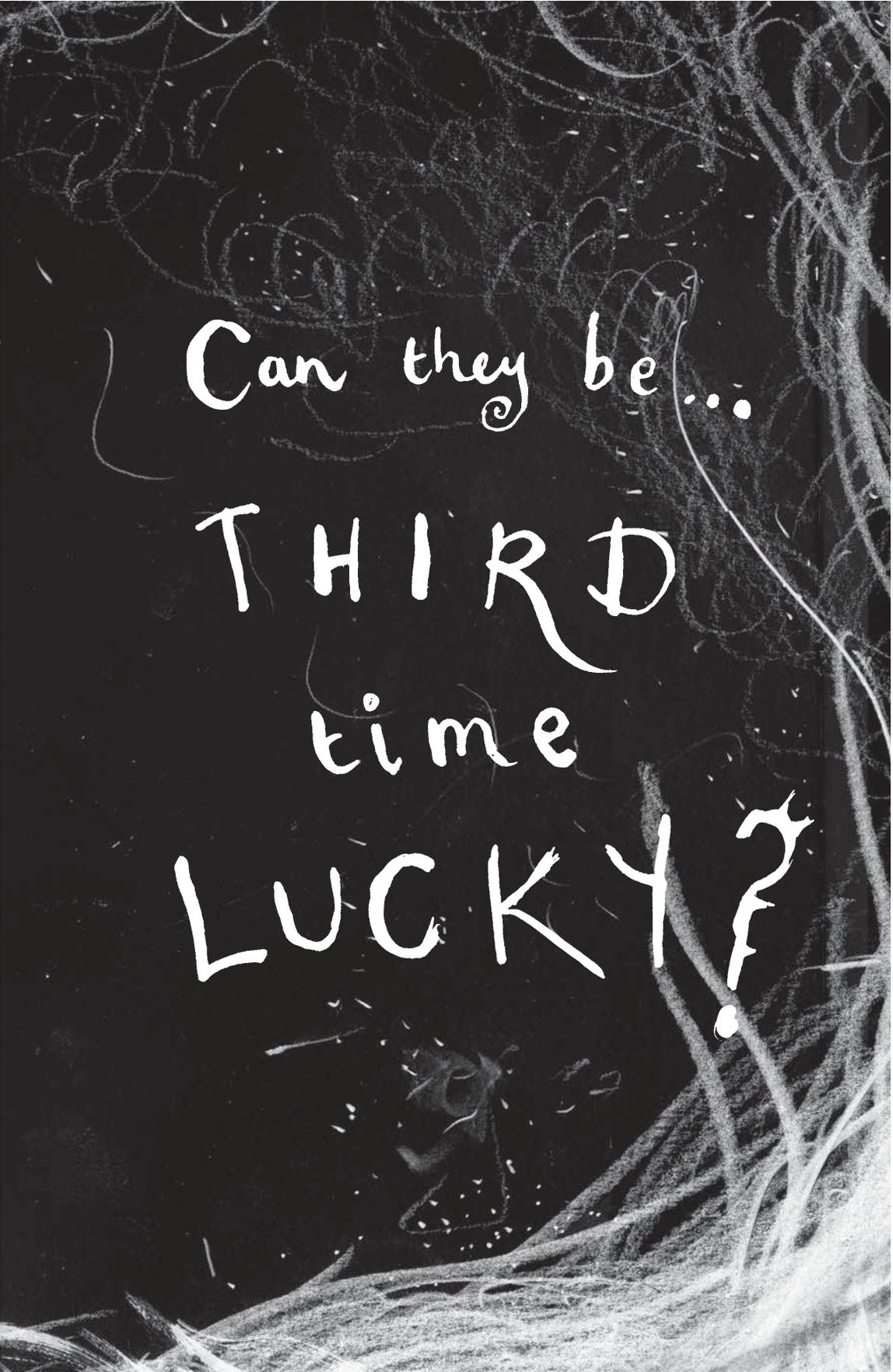
Wish and Xar have run away from their parents, searching for the ingredients for a spell to get rid of Witches. They are outcasts, hunted by Wizards and Warriors alike, and by something far, far worse.

WITCHES.

WITCHES MUST NEVER GET HOLD OF
MAGIC-THAT-WORKS-ON-IRON . . .

But . . .

Twice, Wish and Xar have escaped the talons of the Witches. TWICE, they have cheated Death.



Can they be...

THIRD

time

LUCKY?

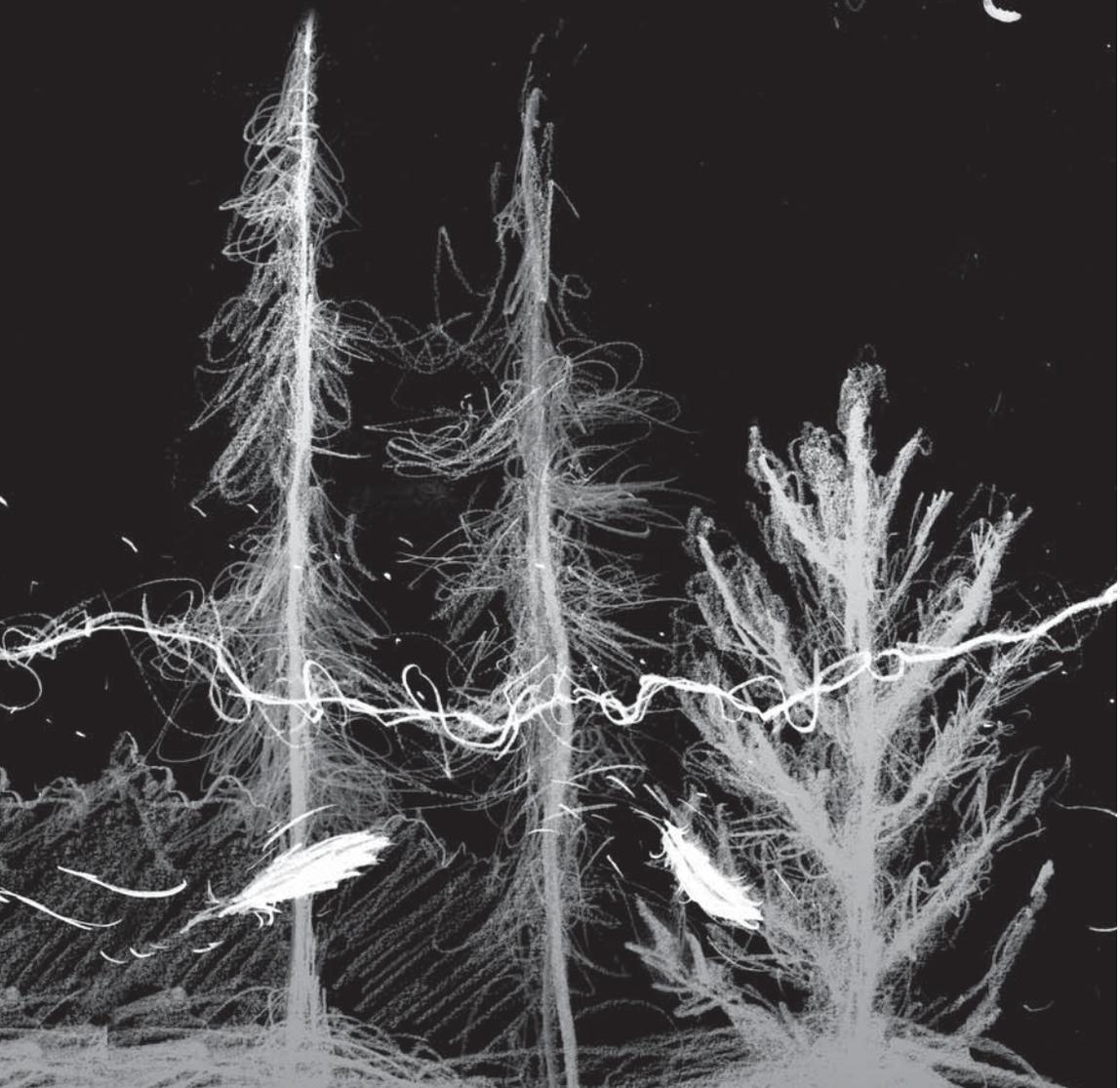
I am a character
in this story.

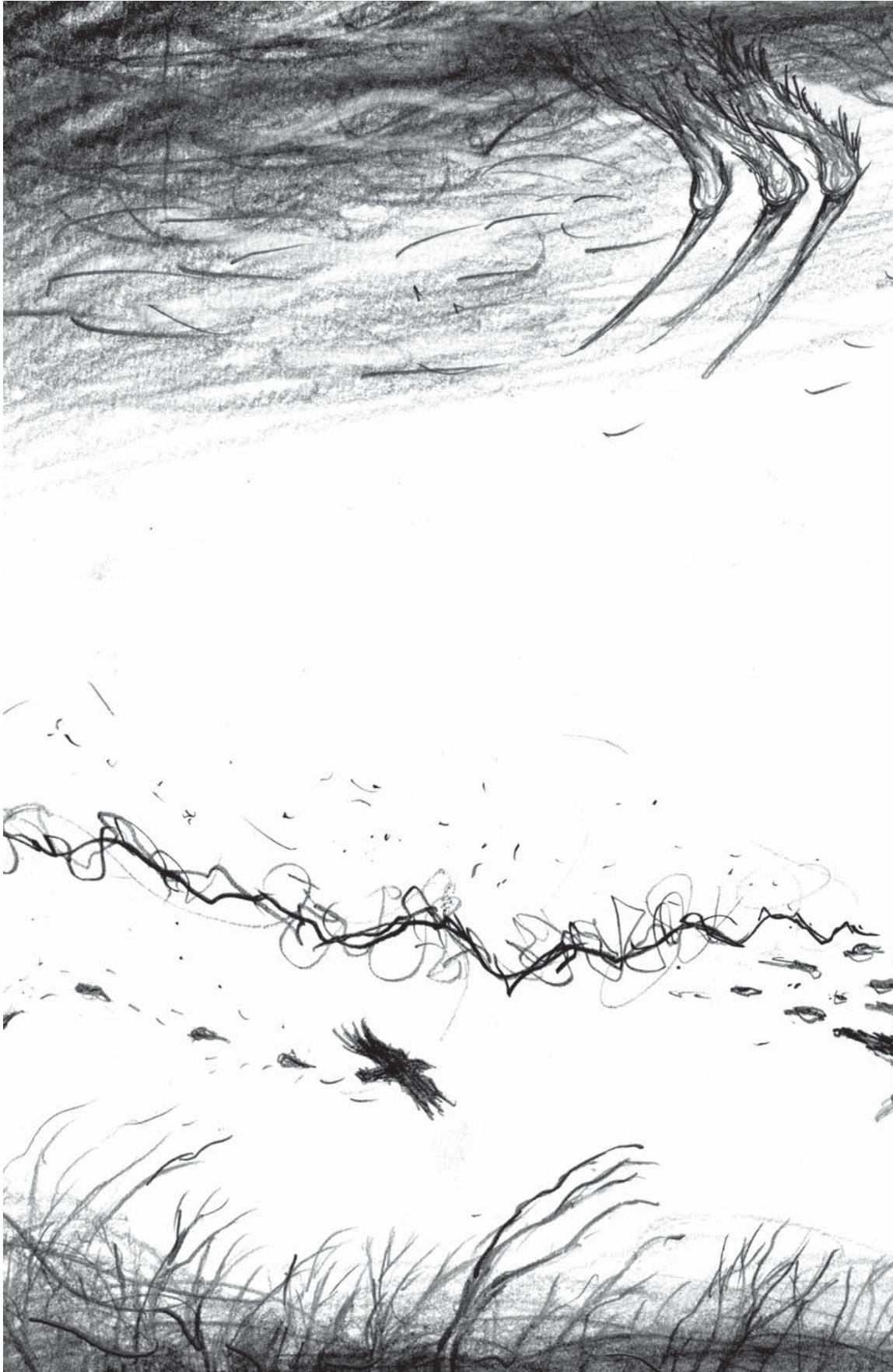
Who sees everything,
knows everything.

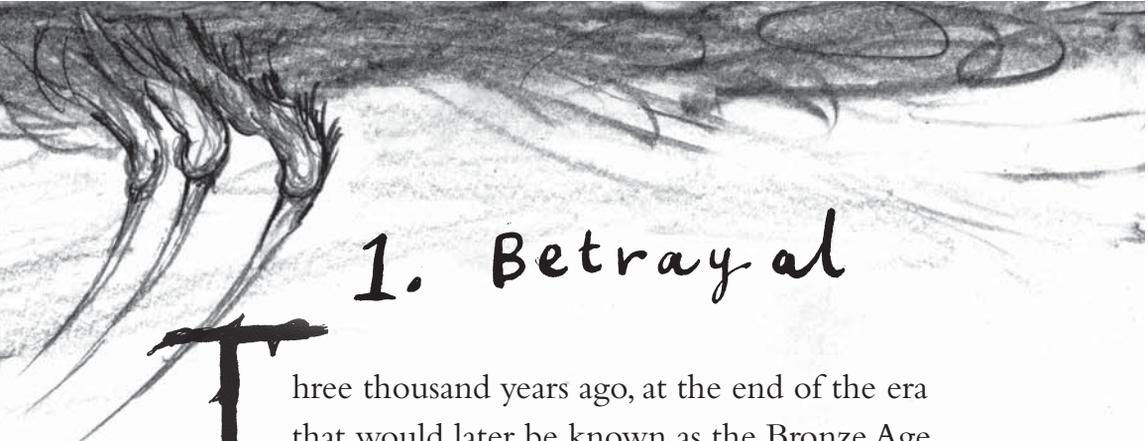
I will not tell you
who I am.

HAVE you GUESSED yet?

Part One
Forest on Fire







1. Betrayal

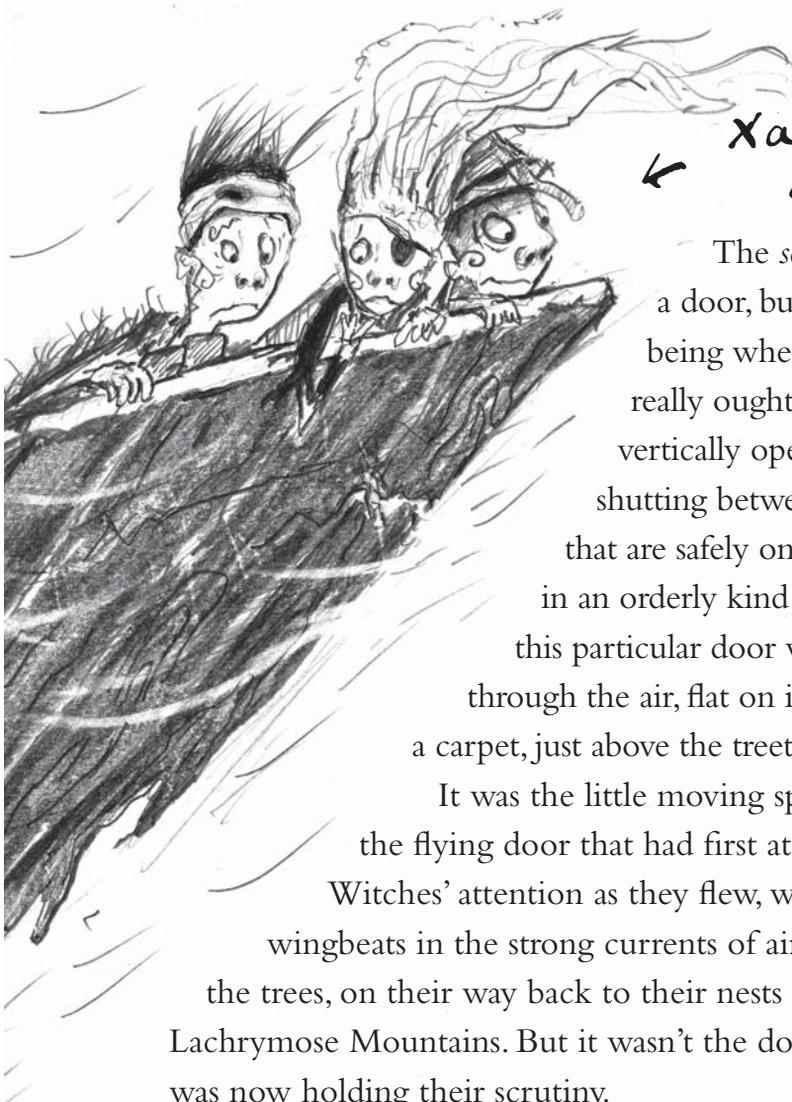
Three thousand years ago, at the end of the era that would later be known as the Bronze Age, the whole of the British Isles were covered in wildwoods.

Good things lived in the wildwoods, animals and Magic creatures and humans who minded their own business, but bad things lived there at that time too, some very bad things.

Two of these bad things were flying above the forest even now. The bad things were presently invisible, but if human eyes could have seen them they would have noticed that they had soft black wings like the wings of crows, and fingers that ended in talons like a bird of prey, and noses a little like a beak. In fact, they were

WITCHES, not good Witches, but very *bad* Witches indeed, and they were flying high, just below the clouds, and as they flew they were watching something down below.





← Xar, Wish
and Bodkin

The *something* was a door, but instead of being where a door really ought to be, vertically opening and shutting between rooms that are safely on the ground in an orderly kind of way, this particular door was flying through the air, flat on its front like a carpet, just above the treetops.

It was the little moving speck of the flying door that had first attracted the Witches' attention as they flew, with lazy wingbeats in the strong currents of air high above the trees, on their way back to their nests in the Lachrymose Mountains. But it wasn't the door *itself* that was now holding their scrutiny.

There were three children lying on their stomachs on top of the flying door.

The invisible Witches looked down at the children. And the children looked down over the edge of the flying door, looking for something in the forest.

The Witches were hungry, so hungry that long dribbles of black saliva were dripping from their lips. They hadn't seen anything so delicious as these children

in weeks, no, perhaps years (and that will give you an idea why people didn't really *like* Witches, either in the Bronze Age, or any other age that the Witches happened to turn up in).

But something was making those Witches pause before swooping on the tasty, unaware little morsels below and fastening their claws into them.

'Thaw si ti gniod tou ereh?' whined Breakneck, wagging her nose from side to side. 'Yhw si ydobon gnitcetorp ti? Od uoy kniht ti dluoc eb a part?''*

Ripgrizzle was pausing too, although the smell of the blood of the human children (which to a Witch is as delicious as that of a cake baking in the oven) was wafting up to him and making him drool like a dog. He was desperate to snatch the treats from under Breakneck's wagging nose and fly back to his nest to feed on the tender darlings all by himself.

But he too was cautious. Before the return of the Witches to the wildwoods, the air would have been full of flying things – birds and sprites and cockatrices, dragons, piskies, all manner of glorious Magical creatures. But now, this early in the morning, which was too close to the night hours of the Witching-time, the forest was as quiet as death, and the Warrior humans kept their

*. Witches speak the same language as we do, but each individual word is back to front. This means 'What is it doing out here? Why is nobody protecting them? Do you think it could be a trap?'

babies locked up safe in their castles, and the Wizard humans kept their babies safe in their treehouse forts. So what were *these* human babies doing then, flying, cool as you like, on the back of a Magical flying door, miles and miles away from any human habitation? Perhaps Breakneck was right. Maybe it was a trap.

The children were talking to one another, and one of them was singing rather shakily, with false bravery: ‘*NO FEAR!* That’s the Warriors’ marching song! *NO FEAR!* We sing it as we march along!’

Ripgrizzle’s gigantic ears curled up at the edges, swiveling and tilting towards the child in order to catch the sound. The eye in the middle of his forehead opened up sleepily. The two Witches flew, unseen, lower, lower, to listen to the children’s conversation.

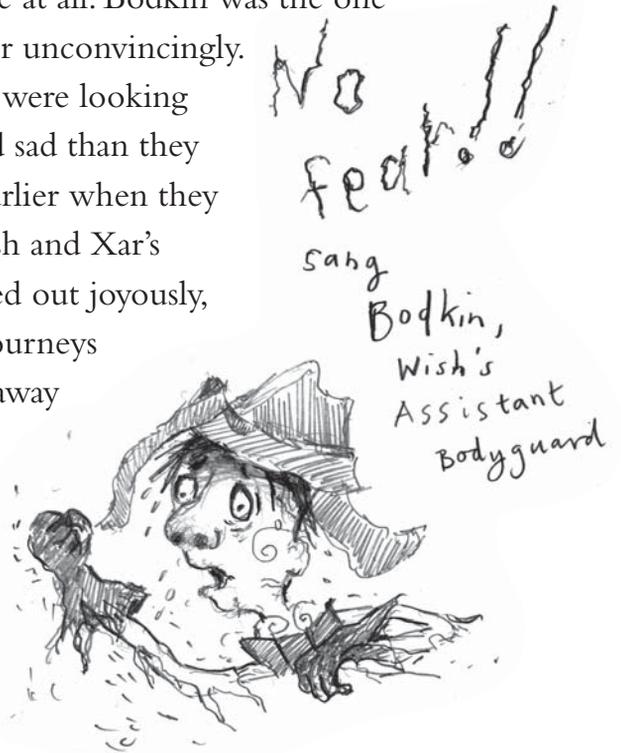
The first young person was a Wizard boy called Xar (his name was pronounced ‘Zar’ – I don’t know why, spelling is *weird*). The Witches did not know it, but Xar was the son of Encanzo, King of Wizards, and Xar had a very dangerous secret, which was that he had stolen some Magic from a Witch and was having trouble controlling it. The Witch-Magic was hidden below a glove in a cut on his right hand, but the Witches could smell it nonetheless, and the smell confused them.

The second was a Warrior princess called Wish, daughter of Sychorax, Queen of the Warriors, and Wish,

too, had a very dangerous secret, which was that beneath her eyepatch she had a Magic eye, and Warriors were not supposed to have any Magic at all.

The third was a Warrior boy called Bodkin. Bodkin was Wish's Assistant Bodyguard, and he was finding this position really rather testing because he didn't like fighting very much, he had an unfortunate tendency to fall asleep in situations of physical danger, and trying to control the uncontrollable little princess was an impossible task because she seemed to have absolutely no idea what rules were at all. Bodkin was the one singing that song, rather unconvincingly.

The three children were looking rather more ragged and sad than they had been two weeks earlier when they had run away from Wish and Xar's parents. They had started out joyously, in the way that these journeys often begin. Running away had seemed like it would be an exciting adventure, but now they were hungry and tired and frightened, for they knew they were being hunted



by the Warriors and the Wizards and the Witches, and that they must never be caught. If the *Warriors* caught them, Sychorax would lock up Wish in iron Warrior fort where the Witches could not get hold of her. If the *Wizards* caught them, Encanzo would lock up Xar in the prison of Gormincrag where his Witchstain could be treated. And if the *Witches* caught them . . . well that was such a scary idea our heroes were trying their hardest not to think about it.

So for the past two days they had been looking for the house of the sister of Caliburn, Xar's talking raven, where they hoped to be able to hide.

'I KNOW my sister lives somewhere around here,' said Caliburn for the umpteenth time. 'She moved here a while ago, back when I was still a human . . .'

Caliburn was actually a Wizard who had lived many lifetimes, and in the previous one he had indeed been a human. And he hadn't been just *any* old human, either, he had been the great Wizard Pentaglioni. Unfortunately Caliburn had come down in the world and returned to the wildwoods in this



↑
Caliburn, Xar's talking raven

present lifetime in the form of a bird. (A rather untidy bird, for Caliburn was continually losing his feathers in his anxiety at the impossible task of trying to keep Xar out of trouble.)

‘I know that my sister has one of the ingredients we need for the spell to get rid of Witches, the tears of the Drood, and maybe we can persuade her to give it to us,’ said Caliburn. ‘And she’ll give us a bed for the night, and a good meal, and she’ll protect us for a while . . .’

None of them were feeling very strong at all, and the idea of a bed for a night and a good meal was even more attractive than the idea that Caliburn’s sister might give them one of the ingredients they needed for their quest. In fact, it brought tears to Bodkin’s eyes.

‘What does your sister’s house look like, Caliburn?’ asked Bodkin.

Caliburn looked a little shifty. ‘Oh, you know, just like any other old human habitation. I haven’t been there in years. I’ll know it when I see it.’

‘Your sister must have a very big house,’ said Wish doubtfully. ‘Look how many of us there are! Are you quite sure she’ll want to have all of us to stay?’

Caliburn gave an airy wave of his wing. ‘Oh, my sister has loads of room! Of course she’ll have us all to stay . . .’

‘Even though we’re a bit, well . . . ODD?’ said Wish,

wistfully. 'I can't believe that your sister won't mind about us being Wizards and Warriors working together, Caliburn – everyone else hates that. And some people even might say we were sort of . . . *cursed*.'

Wish *was* a little odd-looking – a funny little scrawny girl with hair so quivering with Magic that it vibrated and lifted with static electricity every time she moved. She had a pale little face that looked as if the tide had washed over it and taken away all the sharp bits, and a kind but determined expression.

That determination of hers was being severely tested.

Her armour was dented, she hadn't eaten in three days, and her face and hands and legs were deeply scratched from a terrible battle they had a week ago when they were ambushed by wyverns (a type of dragon very common in the Bronze Age).

With all her heart Wish wanted to believe that Caliburn had a sister who would

Wish WAS
a little
odd-looking...



welcome them, even though they were outlaws, disobeying the laws of the wildwood universe . . . but deep down she had a hollow feeling that this was very unlikely.

‘Let’s face it, Caliburn,’ said Wish, trying to be practical and not mind too much, ‘we don’t really fit in anywhere. No one is going to want us.’

‘My sister isn’t as prejudiced as everyone else,’ said Caliburn. ‘There are kind people in the world. You just have to find them.’

‘You’re quite sure your sister hasn’t died and come back as a raven too, and the reason we can’t find her house is that she’s now living in some sort of NEST?’ said Bodkin suspiciously.

‘No, no,’ said Caliburn. And then, less certainly,



‘Probably not . . .’

Bodkin didn’t quite know how to say this without hurting Caliburn’s feelings, but they had been searching for Caliburn’s sister’s house for quite a while now without finding any sign of it. ‘Are you quite sure that you’ve got this right, Caliburn?’ said Bodkin. ‘You’ve only just remembered that you HAVE a sister.’

‘Living many lifetimes is difficult,’ said Caliburn, rather flustered. ‘It takes a while to remember what happened in the previous ones. But now my memory has been jogged I know I have a sister and she’s down in that forest somewhere . . .’

‘Well, I think we should give up looking for your sister and march right into that Drood stronghold on the Lake of the Lost, and just take their tears from them,’ said Xar, who was not a patient person.

‘You don’t understand!’ said Caliburn. ‘The Droids are unrelenting, unforgiving and the greatest Wizards in the wildwoods, and they really don’t like having their tears taken! They’ll kill us if they catch us . . . Much easier for my sister just to GIVE them to us . . .’

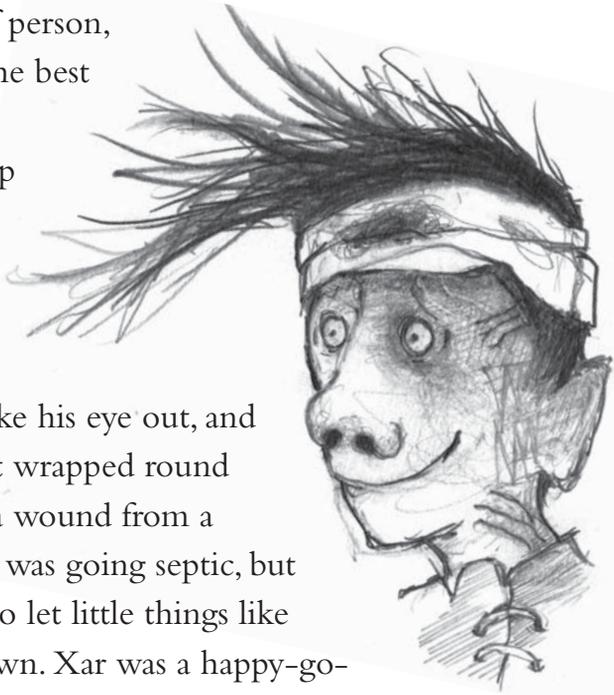
And then Wish spotted something that wasn’t the welcoming fires of Caliburn’s sister’s house, but something much more sinister.

‘Some people are following us down there in the forest,’ whispered Wish, putting up her eyepatch a smidgeon because she could see better through her

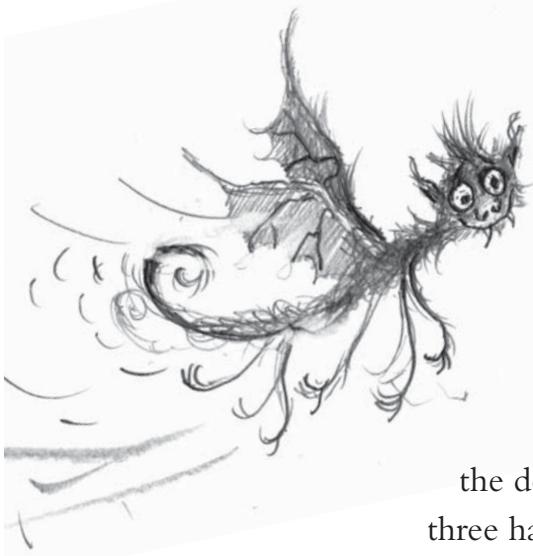
Magic eye. Sure enough, down in the tangle of green woods below them, way in the distance, there were the little flickering lights of many, many torches coming through the trees in their direction.

‘Do you think it could be your sister, Caliburn?’ Xar whispered hopefully, his tummy giving the most gigantic rumble. Only Xar could mistake the ominous torches of what was clearly a hunting party for a welcoming greeting from Caliburn’s sister. But then, Xar was an optimistic sort of person, who hoped for the best at all times.

He had a deep cut over his right temple from where a wyvern had earlier tried to take his eye out, and an old bit of shirt wrapped round his leg covering a wound from a boggart-bite that was going septic, but he wasn’t going to let little things like these get him down. Xar was a happy-go-lucky sort of boy, with a wide-awake look in his eyes that suggested that he was determined to enjoy life despite unimportant details like infected boggart-bites



← Squeezjoss



and wyvern injuries.

As Xar was also a boy of considerable charm and charisma – he had a lot of

companions, and flying with the door were six of his sprites and three hairy fairies. These tiny little

insect-y creatures, so paper-thin you could see their hearts, were buzzing around in a state of such alarm that blue electric sparks were coming out of their ears.

‘Beware . . .’ they hissed. ‘Beware beware beware . . .’

‘No, it’s definitely not my sister,’ said Caliburn, shading a wing over one of his eyes and squinting so he could see better. ‘They’re banging war drums. My sister wouldn’t bang war drums, unless she’s changed a very good deal in the last twenty years.’

‘Don’t worry, sprites,’ said Xar soothingly, for although Xar often led his companions into difficulty, he did take his responsibilities as the leader of his band very seriously. ‘I’ll look after you . . .’

‘Of course you will, Masster!’ squeaked Squeezjoss, one of the smallest and most enthusiastic of the hairy fairies. ‘You iss the most brilliantastic leader in the whole world ever and you woulds never leads us into any trouble!’

‘But I don’t understand it . . .’ said Wish, bewildered.

‘Nobody knows which way we went – the sprites have dimmed their lights, we’re flying so close to the tops of the trees that nobody can see us from below, so how can they be following us?’

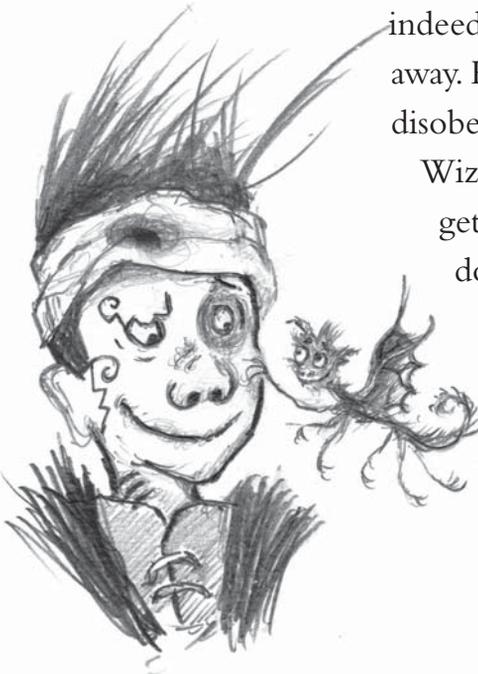
‘Maybe they picked up the scent of Crusher and the snowcats,’ Bodkin suggested.

Xar had other companions too and they were down on the ground. A giant called Crusher, three beautiful snowcats, some wolves, a bear, and a werewolf called Lonesome were following on foot, way below on the forest floor.

‘Impossible!’ Xar whispered back. ‘I’m unbeatable at running away and so are my companions! We’re completely untrackable ...’

As well as being just a *trifle* conceited, Xar was

indeed very good at running away. He was the most disobedient boy in the Wizard kingdom, always getting into trouble for doing things like:



*you would
never leads us
into any trouble...*

Getting his sprites to charm his older brother Looter's spelling staffs so that every time Looter tried to use them, they spanked him on the bottom . . . Painting spots on the Magic mirror in the main hall so everyone who looked in it thought they were coming down with something infectious . . . Pouring Animation Potion on the trousers of Ranter, his least favourite teacher, so whenever Ranter tried to put them on, the trousers skipped out of reach.

As a result, Xar had spent his entire short life running away from the wrath of his father, his teachers, and the other Wizards, so he had become something of a running away expert.

'Maybe someone'ssss betrayed us,' hissed Tiffinstorm, one of Xar's larger sprites, eyes narrowing jealously. 'Probably that werewolf. Never trust a werewolf who you met in a prison. That's good advice, kids.'

'Don't you dare accuse the werewolf just because he's a werewolf!' said Xar fiercely.

Wish agreed with Xar.

'Nobody's betrayed us,' said Wish, soothingly, 'we're on the same side, now, Tiffinstorm. We're all outlaws together, remember?'

'But who is chasing us down there in the forest?' worried Wish.

Caliburn began to list their enemies. 'Well, it could be the Droods . . . or Xar's father . . . or Wish's mother . . .

. And what about the Witchsmeller? *He* hates you . . . Or the Warrior emperor? He'll want to get rid of Magic-that-works-on-iron at all costs . . . ?

Squeezjoos bared his little teeth and squeaked, '*I'll* gets them for you, Master! I'll bites great chunks out of their iron bottoms! I'll makes their noses drip for a week and ties knots in their sandwiches! I'll makes holes in theys socks so theys keep puttings they's big toes throughs it in a REALLY ANNOYING way! I'll put itching powder in theys knickers and I'll leave little fluffballs in theys tummy buttons and theys will NEVERS KNOW where the fluff is coming from! '

As Squeezjoos was not a great deal bigger than a dormouse, and the threat of fluff-in-the-tummy-button was not exactly life-threatening, none of this was likely to be terribly worrying to a Drood or a heavily armed iron Warrior, but Xar thanked him solemnly and said, 'Yes of course you can, Squeezjoos, just as soon as I give the order.'

The one enemy that Caliburn did not mention was *Witches*. Which, given that there were two very large Witches hovering right above their heads at that very moment, was a tiny bit ironic. There was even rather a large clue that Witches were closer than they might realise. Around Xar's waist, attached to his belt, hung two Witch feathers, and when Witches were close these Witch feathers burned green with a strange unnatural

light. They were burning green *now*. my goodness they were, greener than emerald, brighter than starlight, but Xar and Wish and Bodkin had not noticed, so intent were they on staring down at what was going on in the forest below them.

The only person who HAD noticed the glowing of the Witchfeathers was the Baby. The Baby was the smallest hairy fairy of all, and he was going wild with agitation.

But the Baby was still in his egg, and he could only say one word: ‘Goo!’

And nobody listens to babies, even when they have something very important to say.

So although the Baby rolled around urgently in his egg, bumping into people and shouting ‘Goo! Goo! Goo!’ at the top of his Baby voice, none of the other sprites would listen and Xar just batted him away, saying ‘not now, Baby, we can’t play now.’

The Witches, sharpening their talons and hovering not more than ten feet above the door, grinned at each other – nasty grins, for Witches have nasty senses of humour. How amusing! These children were so busy worrying about the danger from *below*, they were completely ignoring the much more serious danger threatening them from *above*.

And they were running away from their parents!

That would explain why they were out at night, so far away from their Tribes and their kinsmen . . . it wasn't a trap at all . . .

The Witches prepared to swoop.

But then the Witches stiffened as something poked out of the back of Wish's waistcoat, swivelling, as if sniffing the air, and then hopping up on to the top of Wish's head to peer over the edge of the door with the others.

The something was a spoon, and it happened to be alive.

The Enchanted Spoon was followed by a key, and a fork and a number of little enchanted pins.

None of this was odd to the Witches. Enchanted objects were perfectly normal back in those days.

But these enchanted objects weren't normal at all, they were very odd indeed . . .

These enchanted objects . . .

. . . were made of iron.

The Witches' eyes blazed red and visible for one horrified moment.

'Itsssss herrrr . . .' hissed the Witches.

'Itssss HERRRRRRR . . .'

The Witches growled like dogs. 'The girl with the Magic eye who has *Magic-that-works-on-iron* . . .'

In an unusual coincidence, Wish, peering



downwards,
also whispered

under her breath at the very
same time as the Witches: 'It's *HER* ...'

'It's her ... it's her ... it's *HER* ...!'

'It's my mother!' cried Wish. 'That's who's following us! Okay, nobody panic ... Stay calm ... Key! Could you hop into the keyhole for me?'

When Wish wanted to fly the door as quickly as possible she needed the key to be in the keyhole so that she could steer the door at speed.

'Of course,' boasted the key in a creaky little voice. 'You see, spoon? The fork is a mere food carrier, a pathetic little potato piercer ... but *I* have a very important role.'

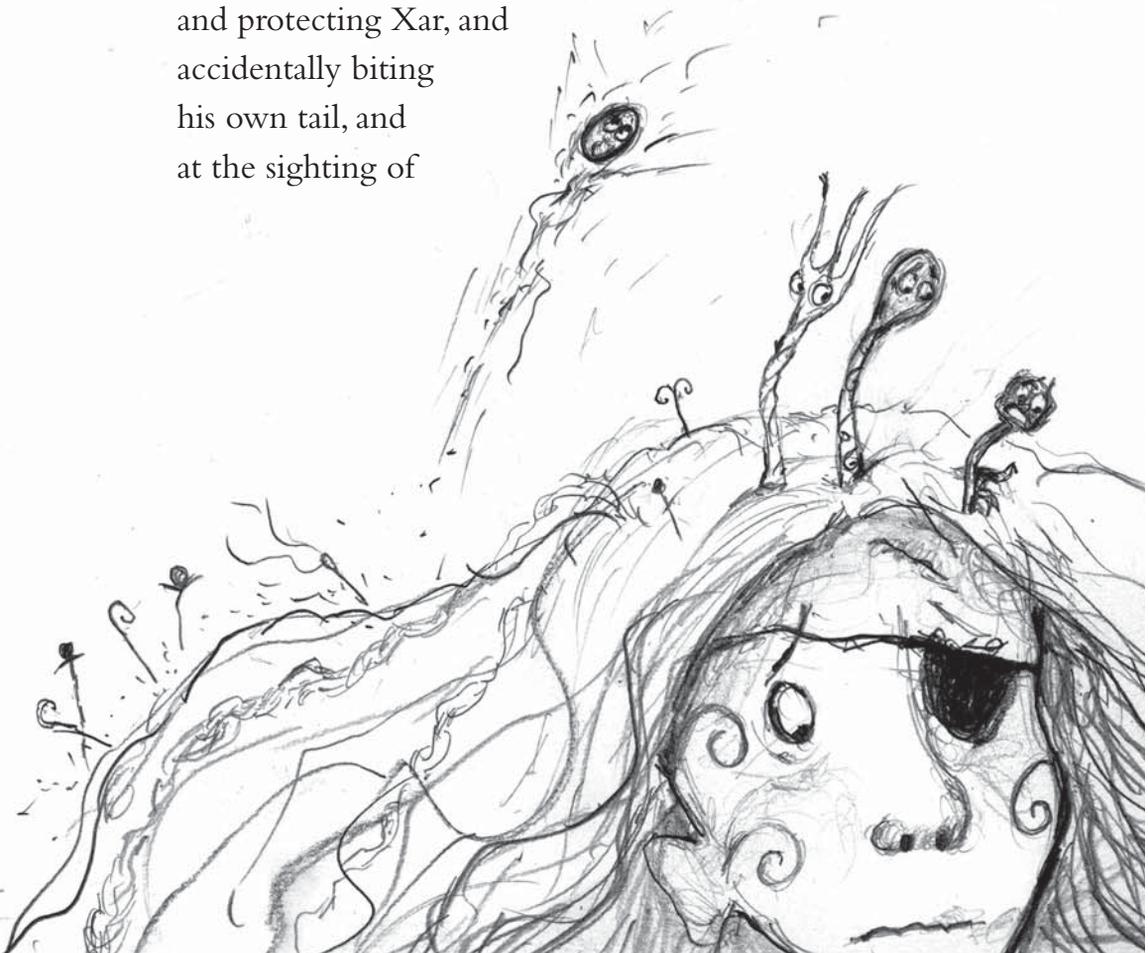
The key and the fork were both in love with the Enchanted Spoon, so the key never lost an opportunity to show off.

The fork waggled its prongs furiously at the key, and the key stuck out its little iron chest and hopped self-importantly into the keyhole.

‘We’ll just very quietly sneak away . . .’ said Wish.
‘Softly, everyone . . . make as little noise as you can . . .’

But before Wish could move the key and send the door skimming silently away across the treetops, she noticed something very odd was up with Squeezjoos.

He had been getting thoroughly over-excited, doing somersaults in the air, squeaking dire threats about making holes in people’s socks, and protecting Xar, and accidentally biting his own tail, and at the sighting of



Wish's mother
he seemed to
completely
lose it. His
little bumbly
body shot
fizzily with
sparks, his
spotty eyes lit up
a luminous bright
green, and he shrieked at
the top of his voice:

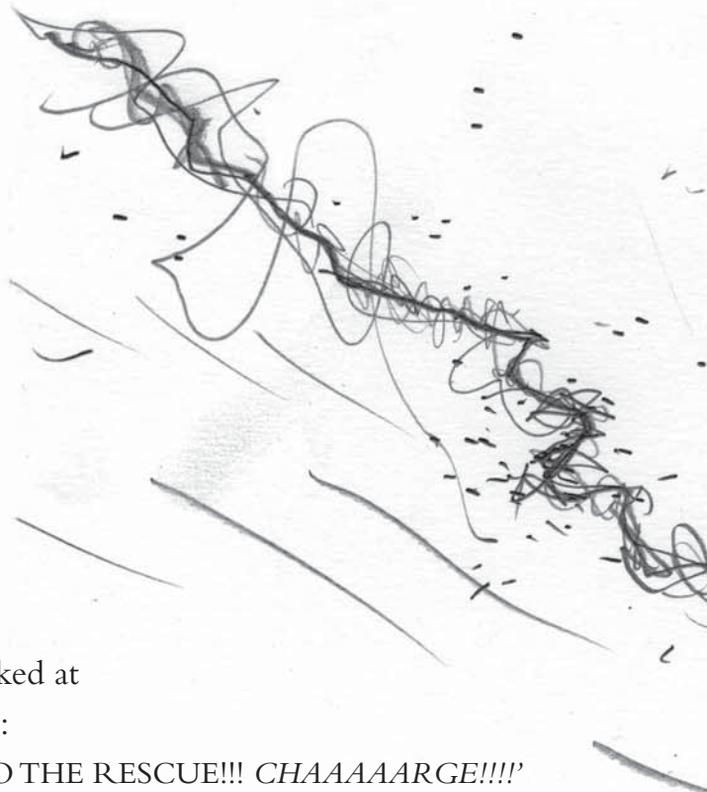
'SOOJZEEKS TO THE RESCUE!!! CHAAAAARGE!!!!'

And the little sprite threw himself in a mad zooming
dive downwards in a lunatic one-hairy-fairy attack on
Queen Sychorax's entire advancing army.

'What . . . is . . . he . . . *doing*?????????' gasped Xar.

And just as the goggle-eyed children on the back
of the door were taking in this *first* incomprehensible
disaster, a *second one* sprang up, bright, fierce, flaming, in
front of their very eyes.

'*My mother!*' cried Wish. '*She's setting the forest alight!*'



soojeeks to the RESCUERS!
C-H-A-A-A-R-GE!!

