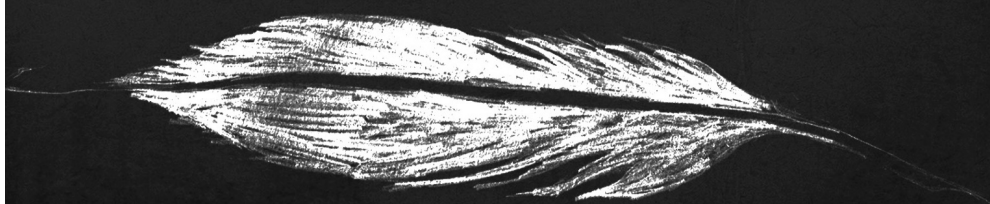


CRESSIDA COWELL

The
Wizards
of
ONCE



*'Imagination is more important than knowledge.
Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the word.'*

ALBERT EINSTEIN

HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

First published in hardback in Great Britain in 2017 by Hodder and Stoughton
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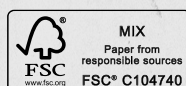
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*This book is dedicated to my son Xanny,
A Hero whose name begins with an 'X' (and doesn't).*



written and illustrated by
CRESSIDA COWELL



Hodder
Children's
Books

This is a story with
two heroes.



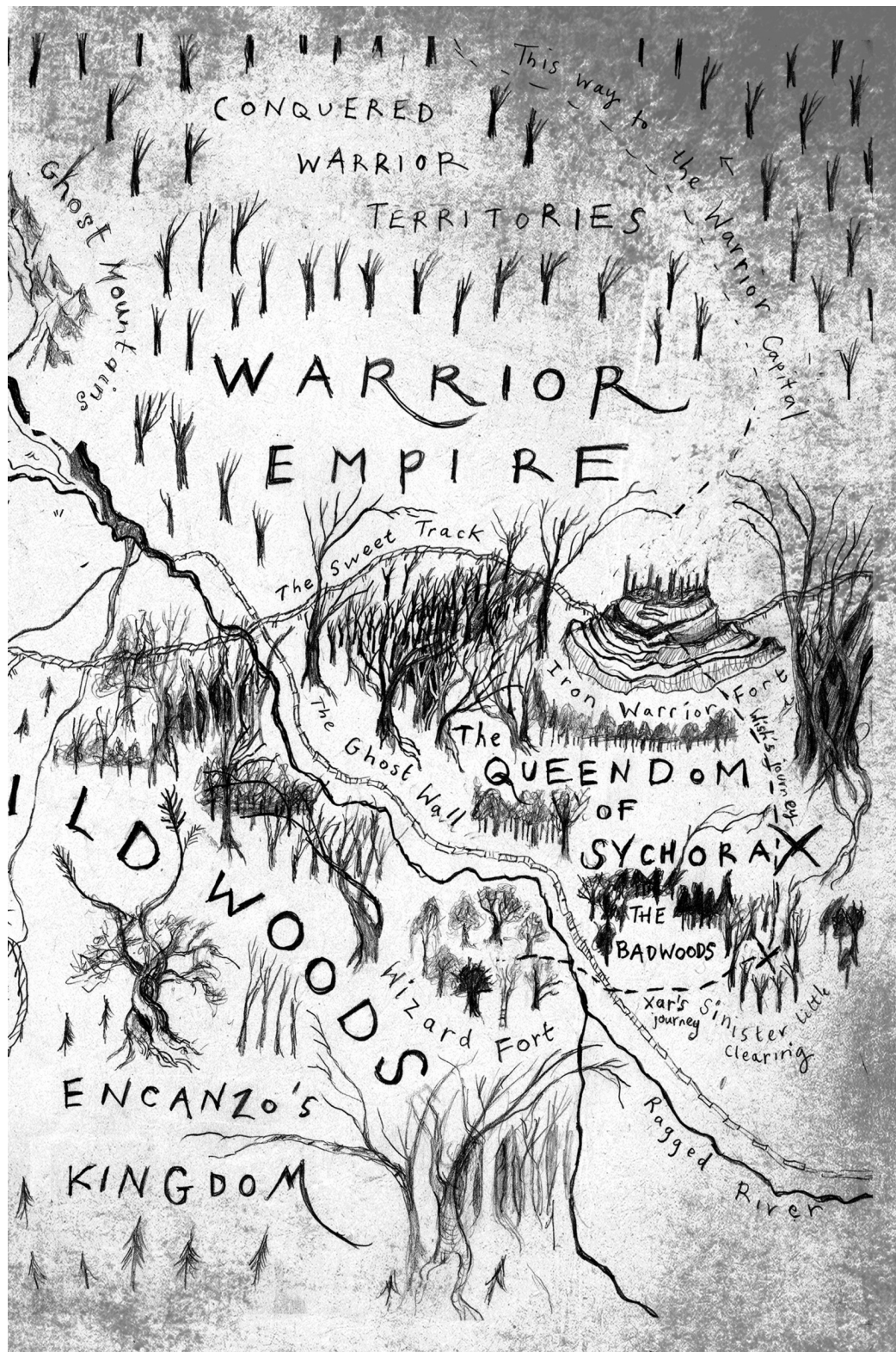
The boy, Xar, is from a Wizard
tribe, but he has no Magic, and
he will do ANYTHING to get it.

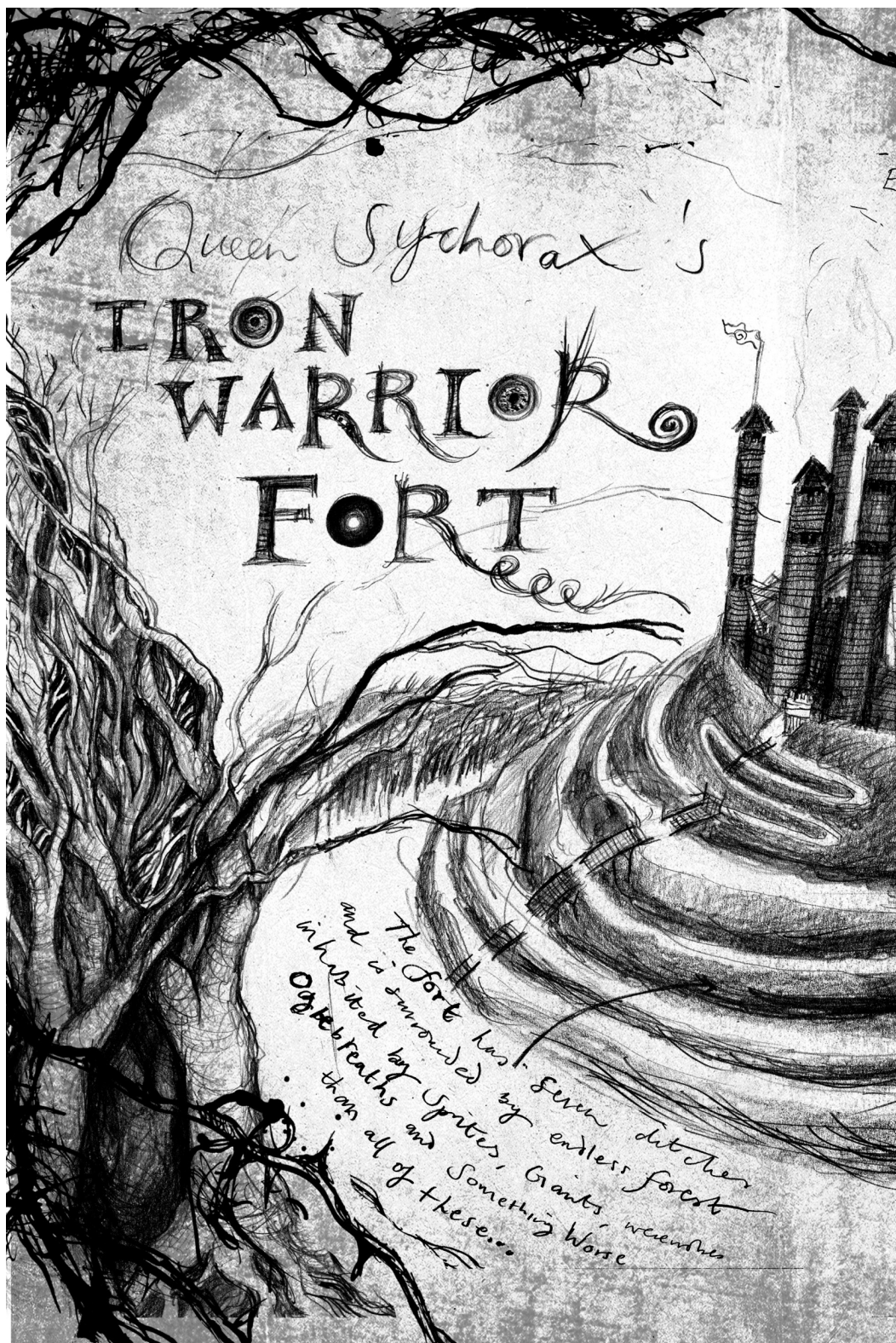
The girl, Wish, is from a
Warrior tribe,



but she owns a banned
Magical Object, and she will
do anything to conceal it.







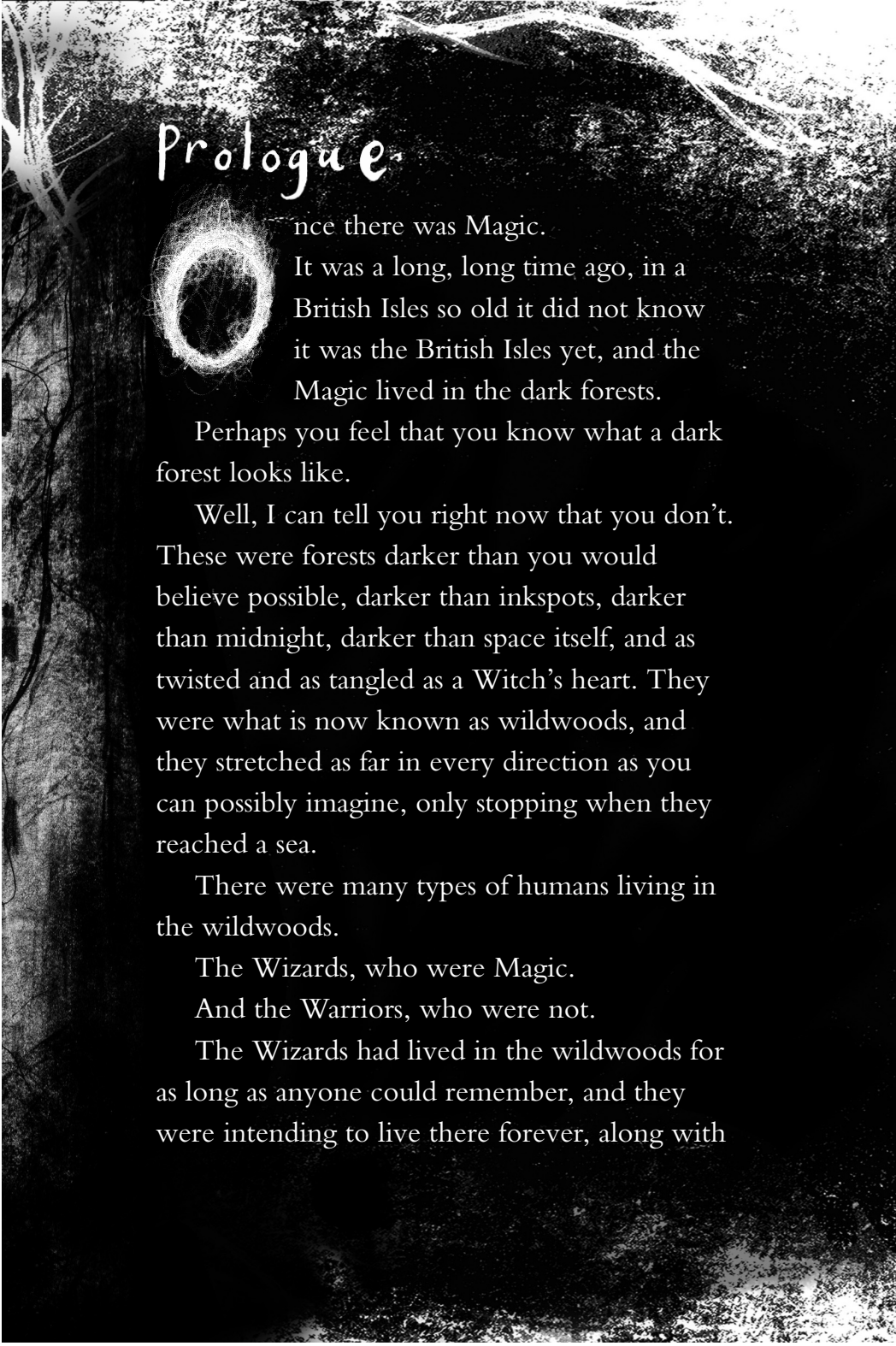
Queen Sychorax's
**IRON
WARRIOR
FORT**

The Fort has seven ditches
and is surrounded by endless forest
inhabited by Sprites, Goblins, Wendigos
Ogrebeasts and Something Worse
than all of these...





Once
there
was
Magic...



Prologue

nce there was Magic.

It was a long, long time ago, in a British Isles so old it did not know it was the British Isles yet, and the Magic lived in the dark forests.

Perhaps you feel that you know what a dark forest looks like.

Well, I can tell you right now that you don't. These were forests darker than you would believe possible, darker than inkspots, darker than midnight, darker than space itself, and as twisted and as tangled as a Witch's heart. They were what is now known as wildwoods, and they stretched as far in every direction as you can possibly imagine, only stopping when they reached a sea.

There were many types of humans living in the wildwoods.

The Wizards, who were Magic.

And the Warriors, who were not.

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 though they had no Magic, they brought a new weapon that they called IRON, and *iron was the only thing that Magic could not work on*. The Warriors had *iron* swords, and *iron* shields, and *iron* armour, and even the horrifying Magic of the Witches was powerless against this metal.

First the Warriors fought the Witches, and drove them into extinction in a long and terrible battle. Nobody cried for the Witches, for Witches were bad Magic, the worst sort of Magic, the kind of Magic that tore wings from larks and killed for fun and could end the world and everyone in it.

But the Warriors did not stop there. The Warriors thought that just because *some* Magic was bad, *that* meant that ALL Magic was bad.

So now the Warriors were trying to get rid of the Wizards too, and the ogres and the werewolves, and the untidy quarrelling mess of good sprites and bad sprites that burned like little

You have now entered
THE IRON WARRIOR EMPIRE
**ALL MAGIC IS
BANNED**

in this territory.

NO SPRITES, NO GIANTS,
NO ROGREBREATHS,
NO SNOWCATS, NO WEREWOLVES,
NO GREENTEETHS
(OR ANY OTHER MAGIC CREATURES).
NO FLYING,
NO ENCHANTED OBJECTS,
NO SPELLING, CURSING OR CHARMING.
NO MAGIC WHATSOEVER.

And any Wizards entering these lands
may most unfortunately have
their heads removed.

By Order of Her Majesty

Queen Sychorax

QUEEN SYCHORAX, IRON WARRIOR QUEEN

stars through the darkness, casting mischievous spells on each other, and the giants who moved slow and careful through the undergrowth, larger than mammoths, and peaceable as babies.

The Warriors had sworn that they would not rest until they had destroyed **EVERY LAST BIT OF MAGIC** in the whole of that dark forest, which they were chopping down as fast as they could with their iron axes, to build their forts and their fields and their new modern world.

This is the story of a young boy Wizard and a young girl Warrior who have been taught since birth to hate each other like poison.

The story begins with the discovery of
A GIGANTIC BLACK FEATHER

Could it be that the Wizards and the Warriors have been so busy fighting *each other* that they have not noticed the return of an ancient evil?

Could that feather really be the feather of a Witch?



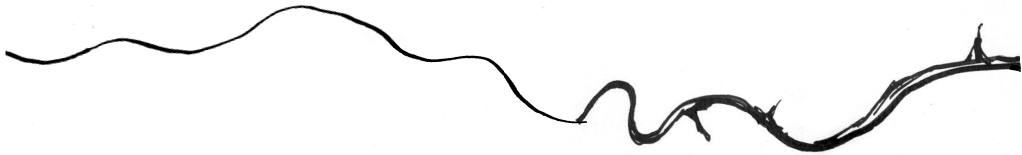
Could
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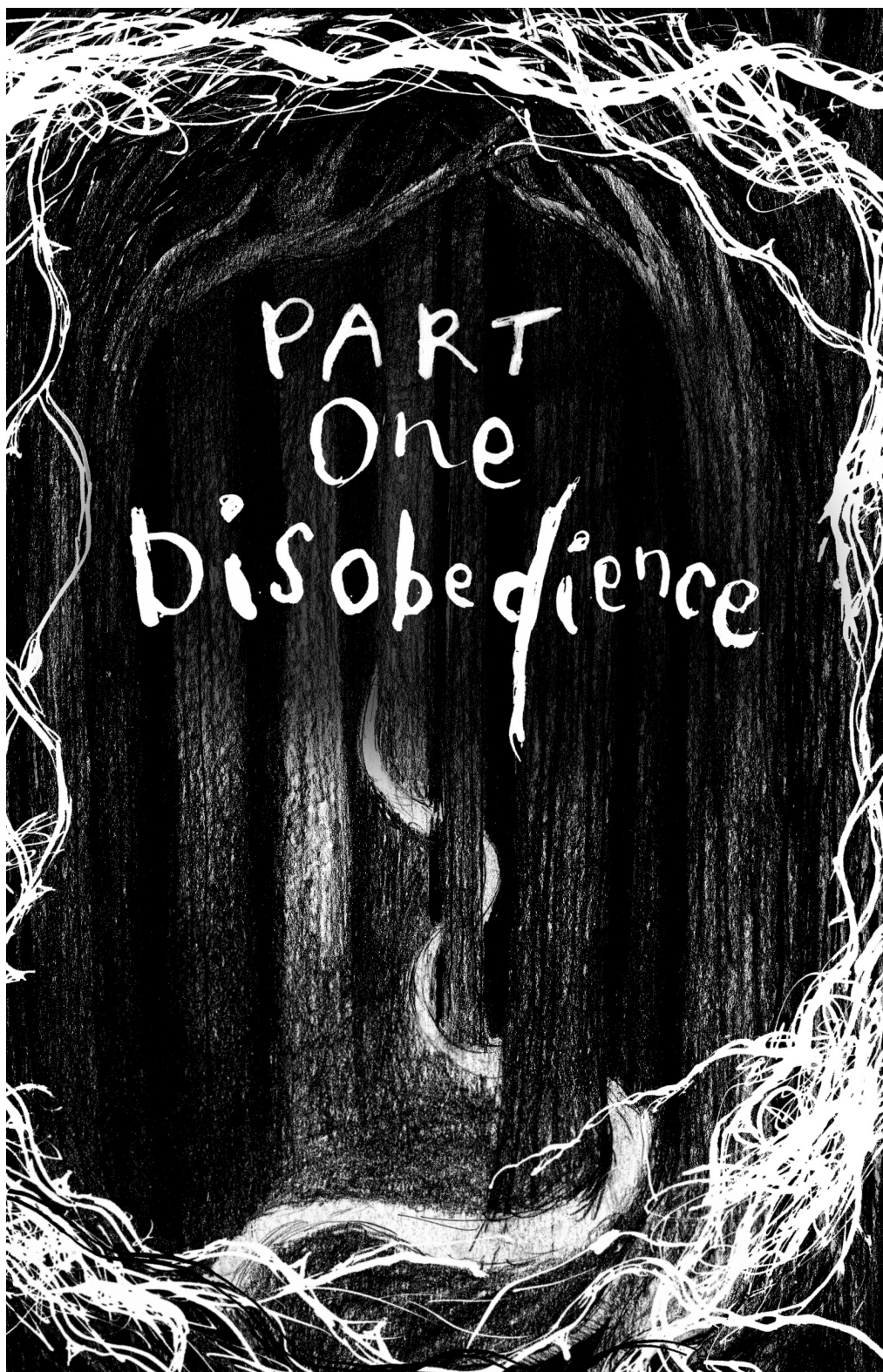
The
Witch feather

I am a character
in this story ...
who sees everything,
knows everything,
I will not tell you
who I am
See if you can GUESS.

The story begins here.

(Don't get lost.
These woods are DANGEROUS.)













1. A Trap to Catch a Witch

It was a warm night for November, too warm a night for Witches, or so the stories said. Witches were supposed to be extinct, of course, but Xar had heard about the way they stank, and he imagined he could smell that now, in the quietness of the dark forest, a faint but definite stink of burning hair mixed with long-dead mice and a little kick of viper's venom; once smelled, never forgotten.

Xar pronounced "Zar", (I don't know why, spelling is WEIRD), was a wild young human boy, who belonged to the Wizard tribe. He was riding on the back of a giant snowcat in a part of the forest so dark and mangled and tangled that it was known as the Badwoods.

He should not have been there, for the Badwoods were Warrior territory, and if the Warriors were to catch him, well, what everyone *said* was, Xar would be killed on sight. Off with his head! As was the pleasant Warrior custom.

But Xar did not look even remotely worried.



Caliburn, Xar's talking raven

He was a cheerful scruff of a boy, with a tremendous quiff of hair shooting upwards from his forehead as if it had accidentally come into contact with some invisible vertical hurricane.

The snowcat he was riding was called Kingcat, a noble creature which was a giant form of lynx, far too dignified for his cheeky master. Kingcat had shining paws so round they looked unreal, fur so deep it was like powder snow, and such a rich silver-grey colour that it was almost blue. The snowcat ran swiftly but softly through the forest, his black-tipped ears swivelling from side to side as he ran, for he was scared, although too proud to show it.

Only that very morning, Xar's father, Encanzo the Enchanter, King of Wizards, had reminded everyone that it was forbidden for any Wizard to dare set one toe in the Badwoods.

But Xar was the most disobedient boy in the Wizard kingdom in about four generations, and forbidding things only encouraged him.

In the past week:

Xar had tied the beards of two of the eldest and

PART ONE: DISOBEDIENCE

most respectable Wizards together when they were sleeping at a banquet. He had poured a love potion into the pigs' feeding trough, so the pigs developed mad passionate crushes on Xar's least favourite teacher, and followed him around wherever he went, making loud enthusiastic squealing and kissing noises.

He had accidentally burned down the western trees in Wizard camp.

Most of these things hadn't been entirely *intentional* exactly. Xar had just got carried away in the heat of the moment.

And yet none of these disobedient things was half as bad as what Xar was doing right now.

There was a large black raven, flying above Xar's head.

'This is a very bad idea indeed, Xar,' said the raven. The talking raven was called Caliburn, and he would have been a handsome bird, but unfortunately it was his job to keep Xar out of trouble, and the worry of this impossible mission meant his feathers kept falling out. 'It isn't really fair to lead your animals and sprites and young fellow Wizards into all this danger . . .'

THE WIZARDS OF ONCE

As the son of the King Enchanter, and a boy with a great deal of personal charisma, Xar had a lot of followers. A pack of five wolves, three snowcats, a bear, eight sprites, an enormous giant called Crusher, and a small crowd of other Wizard youngsters, all following Xar as if hypnotised, all shivering and scared, and pretending not to be.

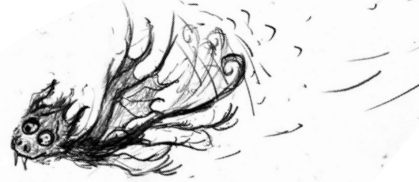
‘Oh, you worry too much, Caliburn,’ said Xar, pulling Kingcat to a halt, and jumping off his back. ‘Look at this lovely, pretty little glade here . . . you see . . . PERFECTLY safe and exactly the same as the rest of the forest.’

Xar looked around with breezy satisfaction, as if they had stopped in a delightful woodland dell, filled with frolicking bunnies and baby deer, rather than a cold, eerie little clearing where the yews leaned in threateningly and the mistletoe

Spooked Snowcat
looking round
the perfectly
safe clearing



Squeezjoos →



dripped like warlocks' tears.

The other Wizards drew their swords, and the growling snowcats' fur stood up with fear to such an extent that they looked like furry puffballs. The wolves padded restlessly, trying to form a protective circle around their humans.

Only the smaller sprites shared Xar's enthusiasm, but that was because they were too young to know any better.

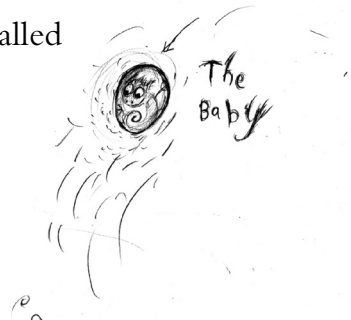
I don't know if you have ever seen a sprite, so I'd better describe these ones to you.

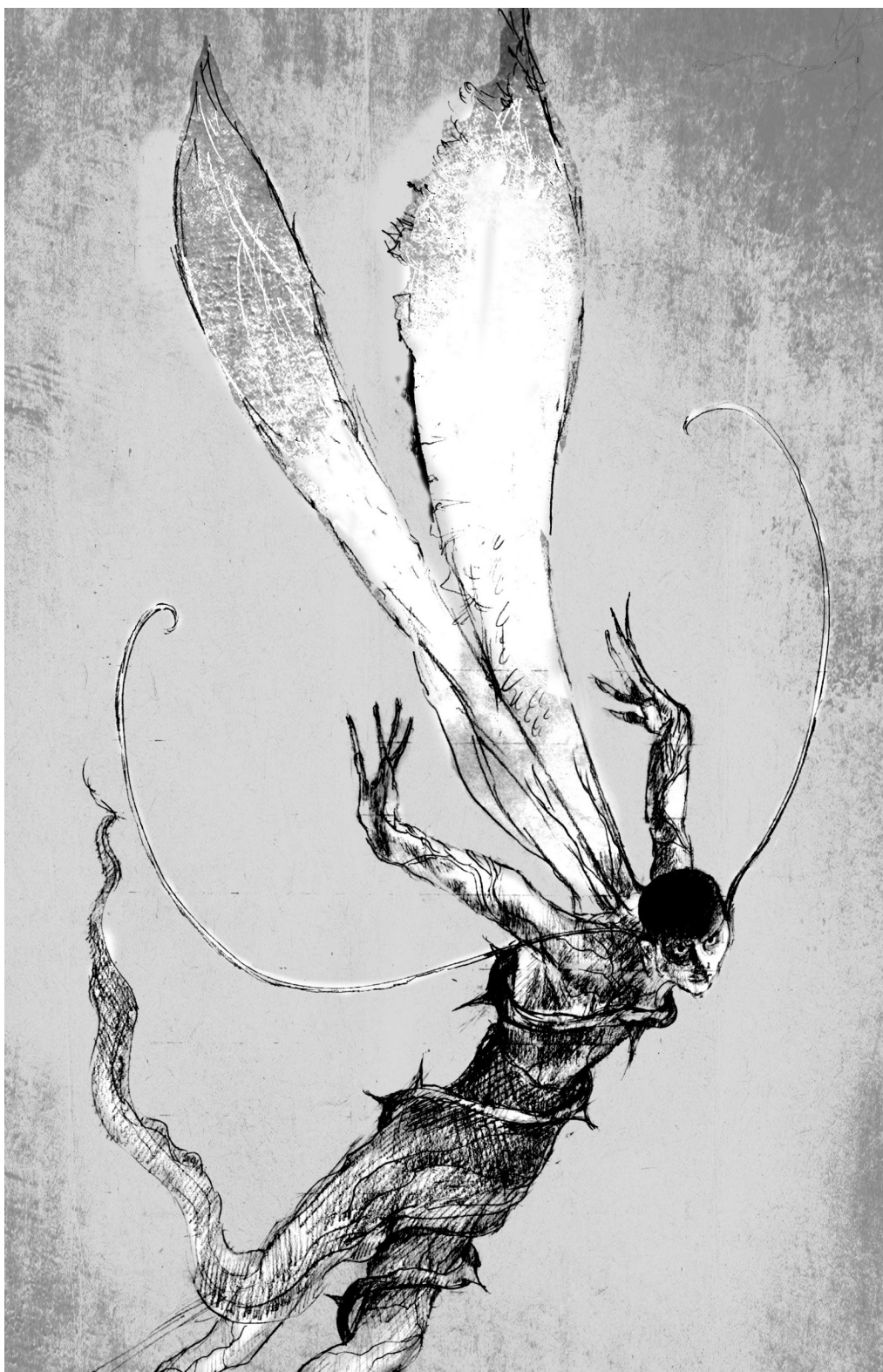
Bumbleboozle



There were five larger sprites, all faintly resembling a human crossed with a fierce, elegant insect. When irritated, or bored (which was often), they blinked on and off like stars, and purple smoke drifted out of their ears. They were so see-through you could watch their hearts beating.

Then there were three smaller, younger ones, who because they were not yet adult were known as 'hairy fairies'. Xar's favourite was an eager, slightly stupid little thing called Squeezjoos.





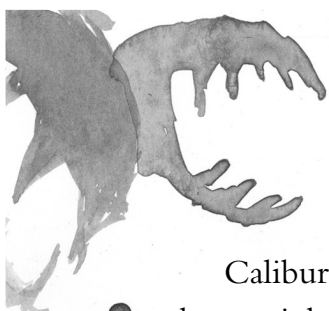


Hmm. What's
this fascintresting
flower?

'Oo it's
lovely! It's lovely!'
squeaked Squeezjoos. 'It's the
tremunglousistly loveliest clearing I's ever seen!
What's this fascintresting flower? Let me guess!
It's a buttercup! It's a daisy! It's a gerangulum! It's a
cauliflower!'

He flew into the upper branches of a
particularly gloomy and sinister tree and
perched on the edge of one of its fleshy
flowers, which had ominous spikes on the
ends of its leaves, and was in fact called
a sprite-eating hobtrap. The flower
snapped shut with the briskness of
a mousetrap, capturing poor little
Squeezjoos inside.





THE WIZARDS OF ONCE

Caliburn landed on Xar's shoulder and gave a heavy sigh.

'I don't like to say "I told you so",' said Caliburn. 'But we've only been in this perfectly safe little clearing in the Badwoods for one and a half minutes and you've already lost one of your followers to a carnivorous flower.'

'Nonsense,' scolded Xar good-naturedly, 'I haven't lost him. That's the whole point about being a leader. Whenever my followers get into trouble I rescue them, because that's what a leader does.'

Xar climbed the tree, and two hundred feet up, swaying precariously on a couple of creaking twig-like boughs, he took out his dagger and popped open the sprite-eating hobtrap to release a panting little Squeezejoos in the nick of time.

'It's fine!' squeaked Squeezejoos. 'It's FINE! I can't feel my left leg but I's fine!'

'Don't worry, Squeezejoos! That's just the hobtrap's digestive juices – the feeling will return in a couple of hours!' Xar called out as he dropped down from the tree. 'You see? I'm a *great* leader! Stick with me and you'll be fine.'

PART ONE: DISOBEDIENCE

The Wizard youngsters looked very thoughtful indeed.

At that moment, Xar's older brother Looter came out of the shadows behind them, sitting astride a great grey wolf, and followed by even more sprites and animals and young Wizard followers than Xar himself.

Xar stiffened, because he hated his older brother Looter.

Looter was a lot bigger than Xar. He was nearly as tall as their father, he was brilliant at Magic, he was good-looking and clever and my goodness didn't he know it. He was the smuggest



smug Wizard you could possibly imagine, and he often sneaked on Xar to get Xar into trouble.

‘What are *you* doing here, Looter?’ stormed Xar suspiciously.

‘Oh, I just followed you to see what unbelievably stupid and pointless thing my ickle baby brother was doing this time,’ drawled Looter.

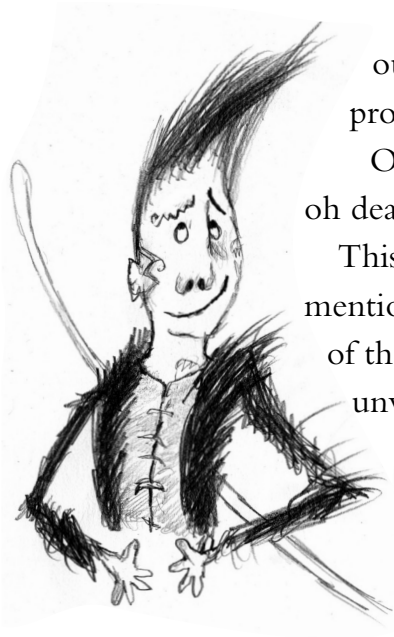
‘Great leaders like me don’t do *pointless expeditions!*’ fumed Xar. ‘We’re here for a REASON. It’s none of your business, but . . .’

Xar considered telling Looter some elaborate lie about what he was doing – but he couldn’t resist showing off.

‘. . . we’re going to catch ourselves a *Witch*,’ boasted Xar proudly.

Ohhhhhhhh dear oh dear oh dear oh dear.

This was the first time that Xar had mentioned to his followers the purpose of their expedition and it was very unwelcome news indeed.



We're going to
catch ourselves a
WITCH

A Witch!

The bear, the snowcats and the wolves went very still and began to shake. Even Ariel, the wildest and most unafraid of Xar's sprites, shot up into the air and momentarily disappeared.

'There are Witches in this part of the Badwoods now, I know it,' whispered Xar excitedly, as if a Witch were a delightful sort of present that he was offering everyone.

There was a long silence, and then Looter and his Wizard followers began to laugh.

They laughed and they laughed and they laughed.

'Oh come on, Xar,' Looter said at last, once he'd got his breath back. 'Even *you* must know that Witches have been extinct for centuries.'

'Ah yes,' said Xar, 'but what if some of them survived, and have been hiding, all this time? Look! Here's what I found in this very clearing, only yesterday!'

Out of his rucksack he carefully took an absolutely gigantic black feather.

It was huge, like the feather of a crow, but

much, much larger. A soft black, fading at the end to a glowing dark, shiny green, the colour of a mallard's head.

'It's a Witch feather. . .' whispered Xar.

Looter smiled his most superior smile.

'That's just the feather of some big old bird,' scoffed Looter, 'some giant crow – you get some weird things living in the Badwoods.'

Xar frowned, and hung the feather from his belt.

'I've never seen a bird as big as this one must be,' said Xar grumpily.

'It's all nonsense,' smiled Looter. 'Only a brainless fool like you wouldn't know that. Witches were destroyed forever.'

Caliburn flapped downward, and landed on Kingcat's head.

'Forever is a long word,' said the raven.

'You see!' said Xar triumphantly.



uh
oh,

uh

oh,

uh

oh,

‘Caliburn is a bird of omen, who can see into the future, and into the past, and *he* doesn’t think that Witches are gone forever!’

‘All I know is, if Witches were *not* to be extinct for some reason, you wouldn’t want to go meeting one in a dark place,’ said Caliburn, shivering. ‘What do you want a Witch for, Xar?’

‘I’m going to catch the Witch,’ said Xar, ‘and remove its Magic and use it for myself.’

There was another horrified silence.

Eventually, Looter spoke. ‘*That*, little brother, is the worst plan I have ever heard in the whole history of plan-making.’

‘You’re just jealous YOU didn’t think of it,’ said Xar.

‘I have a few questions,’ said Looter. ‘How are you going to catch the Witch in the first place?’

‘That’s what the net’s for,’ said Xar, taking a net out of his rucksack and holding it up. You couldn’t fault his *enthusiasm*, at least. ‘One of us will volunteer to be wounded ever so slightly,

and then the blood will attract the Witch . . .’

‘Oh great,’ smiled Looter. ‘Now you’re going to wound one of your sad little followers? In a forest stuffed with raving werewolves and Blood-Sniffing OGREBREATHS? Come on, you’re completely crazy . . . this plan is as pathetic as you are . . .’

Xar ignored him. ‘And then I’ll entangle the Witch in this net when it attacks. Next question.’

‘OK. Question two,’ said Looter. ‘No living Wizard has ever seen a Witch, so how do you know what one looks like?’

Xar opened his rucksack, and took out a book the size of a large atlas, entitled *The Spelling Book*.

Every Wizard is equipped with a Spelling Book, given to them at birth. Xar’s was looking extremely worse for wear. One part of it was invisible (it accidentally got dropped in invisibility potion). Another bit was burned so black you could barely read it (this happened when Xar set the Wizard camp on fire), and many of the pages were loose and dropping out all over the place (too many adventures to go into here).

Xar opened the book to the ‘contents’ page, which had the twenty-six letters of the alphabet written on it in very large gold script. Xar spelled out ‘Witches’ by tapping on each letter in turn, and *whirrrrrrrrr*, the book turned its own pages, which seemed to go on forever and ever and ever, the chapters in front turning invisible as the book riffled through the rest of them like an endless pack of cards, until eventually they stopped at the right place.

‘That’s weird . . . it doesn’t say what they look like . . . but they’re green . . . I *think* . . .’ said Xar.

Someone else thought Witches could turn invisible and they had acid blood. Another that they squirted that blood through their eyes.

‘I’m sure we’ll recognise one when we see it,’ said Xar, impatiently shutting the Spelling Book. ‘They’re supposed to be pretty horrible, aren’t they?’

‘Awesomely horrible,’ said Caliburn gravely. ‘The most terrifying creatures that ever walked this earth . . .’

‘So even if you *do* catch this Witch, how will you persuade it to part with its Magic?’ asked

Looter. 'I'm imagining that invisible green-acid-blood-squirting Witches that are the most terrifying creatures that ever walked this earth, will not give up their Magic if you ask them pretty please . . .'

'Aha,' said Xar, craftily. 'I've thought of that.'

With a grand flourish he put on some gloves, reached into his rucksack, and took out . . . a small saucepan.

Silence again.

'You do realise that's a *saucepan*?' said Looter.

'This is no ordinary saucepan,' said Xar, cunningly.

And then he took a deep breath before he made his shocking announcement.

'This particular saucepan is made out of IRON . . .'



PART ONE: DISOBEDIENCE

Most of the Wizards took a horrified step backwards. The sprites let out shrieks of alarm. Looter alone refused to be impressed.

In fact, he laughed so hard Xar thought he might fall over. 'This is too good . . . you're going to fight a Witch with a *saucepan*!' sneered Looter.



This saucepan
is made out of
IRON





xar... calmly there
Self control...
don't lose your temper

on the other hand...





or you could hit him with
the saucepan.

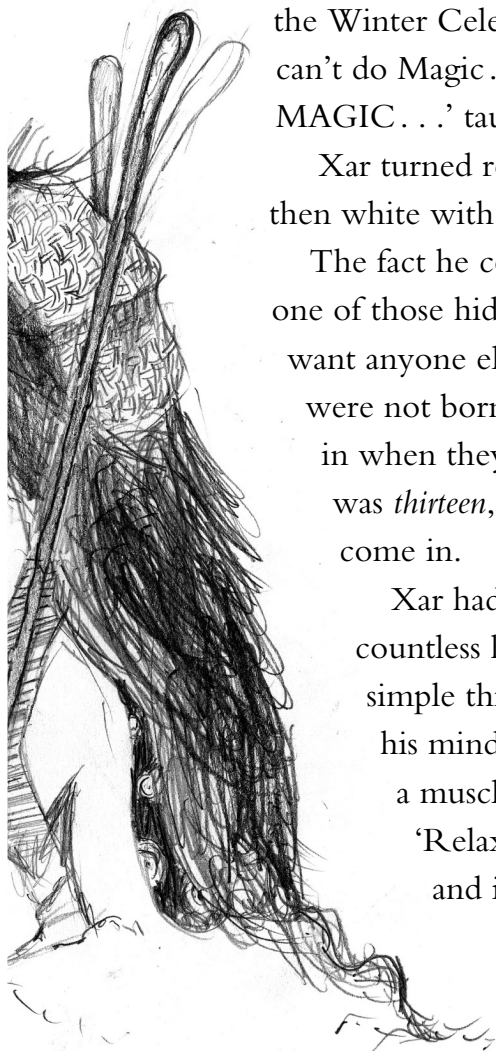
‘You’re no “great leader”, Xar, you’re a liar, and a loser, our father is ashamed of you – and now I know why you’re so keen to steal Magic from a Witch. There’s a Spelling Competition at the Winter Celebration tonight and *YOU* can’t do Magic. . . XAR CAN’T DO MAGIC. . .’ taunted Looter.

Xar turned red with embarrassment, then white with anger.

The fact he couldn’t do Magic yet was one of those hidden sores that you didn’t want anyone else to see. Wizard children were not born Magic, their Magic came in when they were about twelve. Xar was *thirteen*, and his Magic still had not come in.

Xar had tried doing Magic. For countless hours he had tried. Really simple things, like moving stuff with his mind. But it was as if it were a muscle he didn’t really have.

‘Relax,’ everyone said. ‘Relax, and it will happen.’ But it was



like trying to move something with arms that weren't there.

And recently he had been beginning to worry . . . what if it NEVER happened? It was an unlikely calamity, but what a disgrace to the whole family it would be if a child had been born to the King Enchanter who HAD NO MAGIC.

The thought of it made him feel a little sick.

'Poor little baby Xar . . .' crooned Looter cruelly. 'Thinks he's such a big boy but he can't do any Magic whatsoever . . .'

'My Magic WILL come in,' hissed Xar, 'but in the meantime, I swear,' he spat, eyes so *small* with anger that he could barely see out of them, 'I SWEAR I'm going to catch a Witch, and I will squeeze so much Magic out of that Witch, Looter, that I will BLAST you out of existence . . .'

'Oh yeah?' grinned Looter. He reached into his rucksack and took out one of his staffs. A Wizard's staff was about the size of a walking stick and Wizards concentrated Magic through them.

‘Your spelling won’t work on me when I am carrying IRON!’ roared Xar, rushing forward to hit Looter with the saucepan.

Which was perfectly true, but most unfortunately, in his charge forward, Xar tripped over a long tangle of bramble and his gloved hands lost their grip on the saucepan and it went sailing over Looter’s head and into the undergrowth.

Looter pointed his staff at Xar, and whispered the word of a spell under his breath. Looter’s body trembled as the Magic quivered through him, and channelled out of his hand, into the staff, which concentrated it into one quick, fierce, hot bolt of Magic that blasted out of the end of the staff, hitting Xar on the legs.

Xar stopped, mid-charge, his feet stuck to the ground by Looter’s spell.

‘HA! HA! HA! HA! HA!’ laughed Looter’s followers.

‘*REMOVE THE SPELL!*’ shouted Xar, struggling to shift his feet, but it was as if they had turned to lead.





‘No, I don’t think I will . . .’ smiled Looter.
Xar lost his temper.
He snapped his fingers.

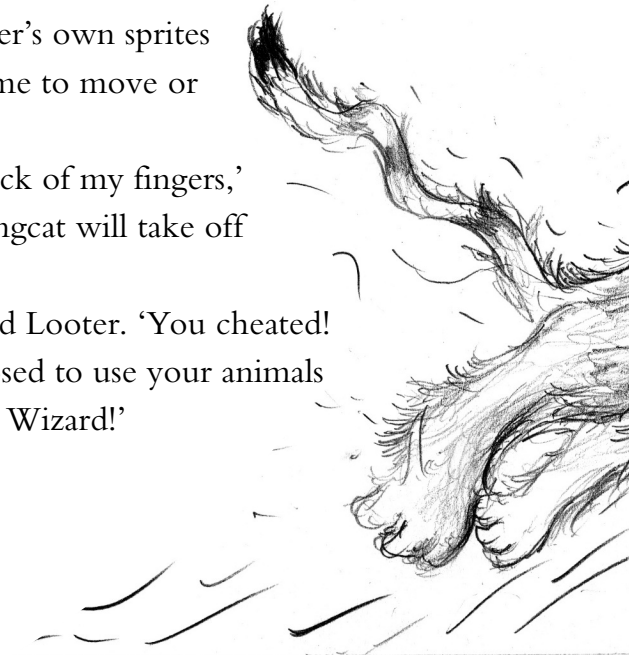
REEOOOWWW!

Before anyone could blink or think, Kingcat launched himself at Looter, huge jaws agape, sixty stone of silvery-grey killing machine. Screaming in terror, Looter was pinned up against a tree trunk, looking aghast at the great cat’s nightmare face, inches away from his own, and what felt like four kitchen knives sinking into his shoulder. They had already drawn blood.

None of Looter’s own sprites or animals had time to move or protect him.

‘One more click of my fingers,’ spat Xar, ‘and Kingcat will take off your head.’

‘Cheat!’ panted Looter. ‘You cheated! You’re not supposed to use your animals to attack a fellow Wizard!’



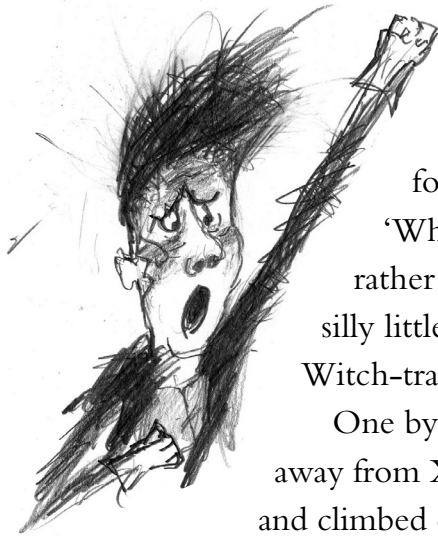
PART ONE: DISOBEDIENCE

'REMOVE THE SPELL!' shouted Xar.

Looter was now every bit as angry as Xar himself. But what could he do?

He pointed his staff at Xar, and removed the spell, so that Xar's feet could move, and then Xar made a signal to Kingcat to let Looter go. 'You're mad . . . a lunatic . . .' raged Looter, as Kingcat dropped him, and Looter gazed in astonishment at the four neat, bleeding puncture wounds in his shoulder. 'Your animal has BITTEN me . . . if you DARE to enter that Spelling Competition, I am going to ANNIHILATE you . . .'





Looter turned to Xar's followers.

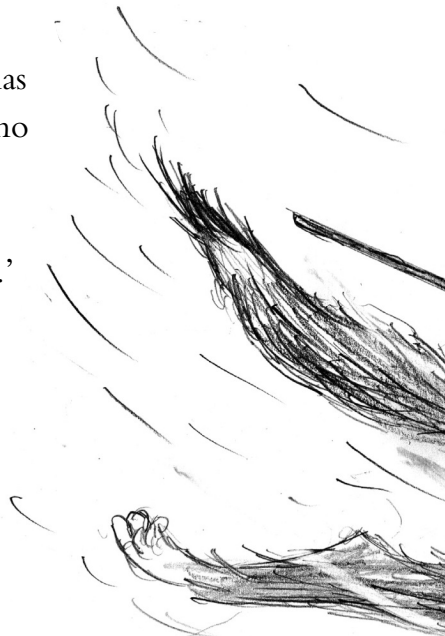
'Who wants to come with ME rather than staying here with this silly little madman and his stupid Witch-trap?' shouted Looter.

One by one, Xar's followers backed away from Xar and towards Looter, and climbed on board their wolves

or snowcats, muttering things like, 'Sorry, Xar . . . this is a bit too crazy, even for you,' and, 'If Witches aren't extinct, they are bad Magic, Xar . . . we shouldn't be here . . .'

'You see?' crowed Looter triumphantly. 'A great leader has to have someone to lead, and no one wants to follow a Magic-less lunatic. Good luck with meeting your *Witch*, loser-boy.'

And then Looter rode away on the back of his wolf, followed by most of the other Wizards.



PART ONE: DISOBEDIENCE

‘Cowards!’ roared Xar, nearly *crying* he was so angry. He ran into the undergrowth to retrieve the saucepan, and shook his fist at their departing backs.

‘WE’LL SHOW YOU! WE’LL CATCH A WITCH, WE’LL TAKE MAGIC FROM IT, AND THEN WE’LL BE SO MAGIC WE’LL FLY WITHOUT WINGS!’

Xar turned with a sigh to the bedraggled remains of his followers.

Why did Looter always have to spoil everything?

Good
luck
with
meeting
your
WITCH,
loser-
boy...



Xar had hardly anyone left now, only three young Wizards whose Magic hadn't come in either: a girl called Heliotrope and two boys, Rush, and Darkish, a large lad with even larger ears, who had reached the age of seventeen without showing any signs of Magic whatsoever, and who was slightly on the dim side.

'Bother, he's left me with the losers,' tutted Xar. 'Darkish, you're the biggest, so you need to do the most digging,' he ordered. 'Rush, I'm afraid we're going to have to *wound* you a little to tempt the Witch into the trap . . . And if anything goes wrong. . .'

'I thought you said this mission was completely safe?' said Rush suspiciously.

'Well, nothing is ENTIRELY safe. . . ' Xar backtracked quickly. 'Life is dangerous, isn't it? After all, you could get killed just climbing a tree like I nearly was just now.'

'This is not just climbing a tree!' spluttered Caliburn from above, as the three young Wizards began to obey Xar's orders. 'This is intentionally trespassing on Warrior territory trying to set a

PART ONE: DISOBEDIENCE

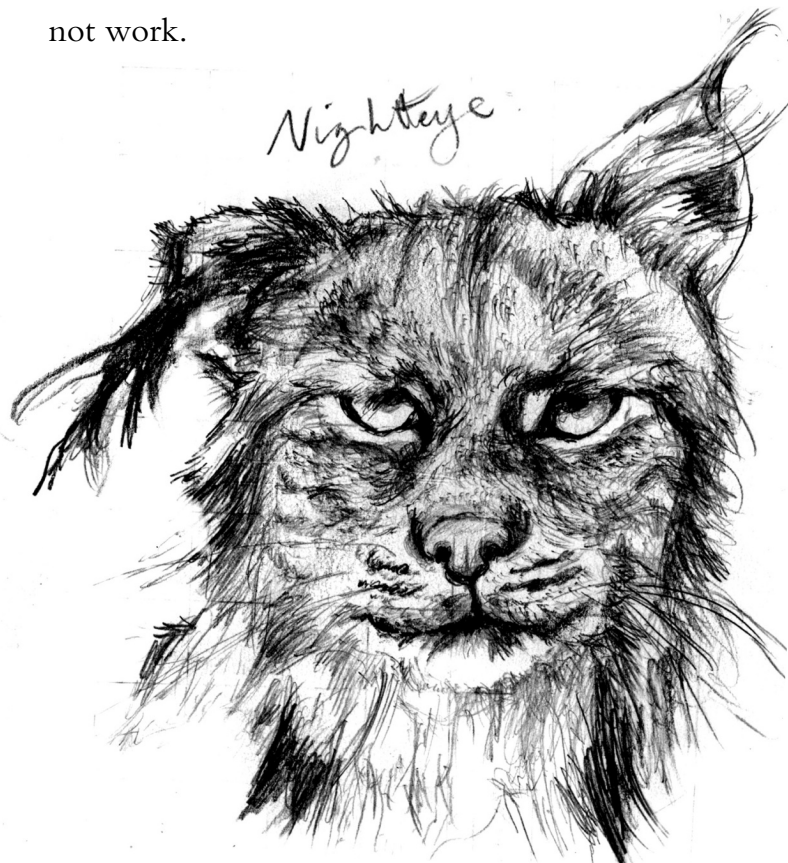
trap for the scariest life form that has ever walked this planet!’

Caliburn sighed.

Nobody was going to listen to *him*.

Caliburn perched rigid on the tree-branch, with his head under his wing, as if – for as long as he buried his head under there, if *he* couldn’t see the future – the future would not happen.

But, of course, the old bird knew that would not work.



Xar's Sprites



Timeloss



Tiffinstorm



Mustardthought



Squeezjoos



Bumbleboozle



Hinkypunk



Ariel