

## CLIP-CLOP AND CHIT-CHAT

Youngest's nightmares about the Deciding had been getting worse and he had barely slept last night. Lying in bed, with his eyes open, he was worrying over all the ways today might go. And the longer he thought, the more panicked he felt.

Climbing over his siblings and out of bed, he snuck past his mother and grandmother's room, and tiptoed down through the kitchen and out into the garden.

Youngest was the youngest of the six Faircrest children. At twelve years old he was also the shortest, the blondest and the only one with green eyes.

His family lived in a cramped and crumbling house on the outskirts of Bogsmarsh, a small swampy town beside a forest on the island of Rivell. The town was so named because at its centre lay a bog. Why you would build a town around a stinking, steaming bog is a question no one knew the answer to, and I've asked *literally* everyone who lived there.

Across the Faircrest roof were a series of runnels that caught rainwater and dribbled it into an old wooden bucket by the side of the house. As he did every morning, Youngest picked it up and took it across the garden for their horse Braken.

Braken must be the oldest horse on the entire island. Once a jet-black colour, he was now a more muted grey and looked like a big ball of hair with legs and teeth.

‘Braken, breakfast time!’ Youngest called as he approached the stable. The stable was narrow and short and could hold just one horse. As Braken poked his head out, it looked less like a building and more like the horse had grown a wooden shell.



‘Good morning, Youngest. How are you today?’

Braken can’t speak. That’s important to stress. Animals haven’t spoken in Bogsmarsh for hundreds of years. So, instead, Youngest says what he imagines Braken would say for some early-morning conversation.

‘You’re looking very handsome this morning, Youngest,’ continued “the horse”. ‘I love your outfit.’

‘Why, thank you, Braken. It’s the same no cloak and hand-me-downs as every other day ... well, for a few more hours at least.’

Youngest plonked the bucket of water by Braken and watched as he plunged his head downwards and started drinking. Collecting hay from the back of the stable, Youngest brought it to Braken and sat in front of him.

‘So ... it’s the Deciding today,’ he said gravely.

Braken instantly stopped drinking. Even he looked nervous.

Taking place once a year, on our last day of school, the Deciding is when we *finally* get our profession cloaks.

The Decider of Bogsmarsh (Sarabeth Roe, our leader and lawmaker) will weigh up *everything* we’ve done at school and Decide our life-long professions. The good, the bad and the bits we’ve forgotten, it’s all taken into her considerations. You only get one Deciding – and today’s the day.

Youngest desperately wanted to be given a green cloak with a sword emblem. That meant he’d train to become a guardian of Bogsmarsh, a protector of the town and

master of combat – just like his mum. These battle-ready long cloaks were as strong as iron and acted like a shield. They were impenetrable.

But there were lots of other cloaks on offer: short bronze creaturologist cloaks with a paw insignia, designed to withstand venom and teeth, perfect for those spending a lifetime studying, training and (occasionally) befriending the many fantastical creatures of the world.

Then there were the red inventor cloaks with their golden cogs emblem; these cloaks were made of individual strips and covered in pockets and hooks to hold different instruments and tools, essential for those inventing new contraptions, gizmos and gadgets to help us live alongside the bog.

Or there were the ink-proof purple chronicler cloaks that had a quill emblem. These had secret stashes of paper sewn into every seam, the ideal resource for those studying and chronicling the history and heroes of Bogsmarsh.

There are twelve cloaks in total, each of them perfectly designed for the career they're made for.

But while Youngest wanted to be a guardian most of all, he'd have taken any but the worst profession: *dearth*.

Dearths wore grey cloaks with a pig emblazoned on them. With no special in-sewn abilities at all, wearing one meant you lacked the skill for any other profession, so you just had to watch the pigs all day. It's a total waste of time and there's only ever been one person who's done it before: Steve.

And Steve's a scarecrow.

Braken moved to the hay and began eating. 'Think positive. I reckon the Decider will make you a guardian, just like Mum,' said "Braken" with a neigh.

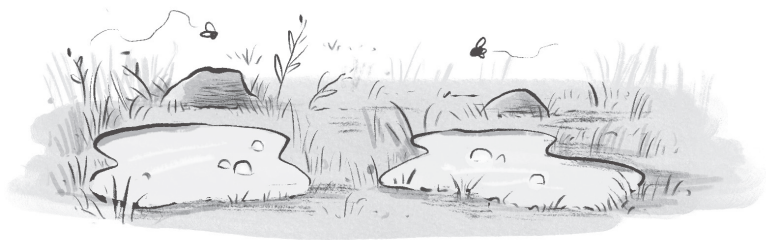
Another wave of nerves squeezed Youngest's stomach. In a few hours he'd be standing outside the Decider's fort, ready to seal his fate.

'But what if I'm not good enough?' said Youngest heavily. 'What if ... I'm not like her? Or anyone else in the family? I'm not really good at anything, Braken.'

'Youngest!' came a *real* voice. 'Come and help me serve up, please.' It was his mother, Gwendoline, calling from the kitchen.

Youngest stood up and patted Braken on the head.

'Thanks for your support,' he said and headed back to the house.





## A FAIRCREST STAPLE

As Youngest walked into the kitchen, he found his mother in her usual position, watching porridge bubble.

To Youngest, Gwendoline Faircrest looked as she always had. With long flowing hair, a mixture of blonde and grey, which ran in a plait over her green cloak, a few scars on her face from past battles and her sword strapped to her waist.

You see, Gwendoline was the most celebrated guardian in Bogsmarsh's history. She's killed more trolls, dire wolves and banshees than most of the other Bogsmarsh guardians combined. She holds the record for most goblins killed in a single summer (217), most days spent in the wilderness hunting (807) and most pixies caught with her bare hands (1). But when Youngest's father (Euphineus) died eight years ago, she retired from being a guardian to raise her children.

And she had a lot of children.

'Grab that ladle, will you, darling?'

Youngest passed his mother the ladle and watched as she stirred the cauldron dangling over the flames.

The kitchen was circular and centred round the fire. A retractable roof let the smoke billow upwards and outwards while the family ate on the floor by the heat for every meal, *always* in the same positions.

Youngest sat in his spot and looked down at the floor. He was usually next to Eldest Faircrest (his oldest sister at eighteen years old) but she'd been away for weeks. As a newly graduated guardian, she was on a top-secret mission in the Snowy Caps, the frozen mountains in the north.

What's the mission?

*No idea.*

When will she be back?

*No idea.*

Would I want to go?

Yes, it sounds amazing! I've always wanted to go on an adventure like that!

Sorry, I'm getting distracted. My mind wanders when I write. Back to the kitchen...

'Well, today's the day...' said Youngest with an exhale.

'Today's the *what?*' Gwendoline barely looked at him. The porridge was proving far more captivating than whatever Youngest was saying.

'Well, it's -'

'**BREAKFAST!**' Gwendoline shouted up into the house. 'Sorry, Youngest, when the porridge is ready, it's battle stations.'

Muffles were heard upstairs as the news spread.

‘Carry on, I’m listening,’ she said with her back to him, beginning to serve up.

‘It’s just that...’ Youngest began, lowering his voice, not wanting his siblings to overhear, ‘I feel ... *scared* ... for today.’

‘Today?’ his mother said, her eyebrows raised. ‘Today being...?’

‘What are you two whispering about?’ said a curious voice. Youngest and Gwendoline shrieked in surprise. Appearing from thin air was Anther Faircrest.

After Eldest was seventeen-year-old Anther – or Ant as we called him. Ant was so named because of a hearing mishap. He was meant to be called *Another*, but the name had been written down wrongly and never corrected.

Ant was the tallest of the family and the cleverest of the children. He was always sat cross-legged in a corner, with his long hair draped over his face and a quill tucked in his hand, scribbling down ideas for machines to help his family. It was unsurprising that he was offered an inventor’s cloak at his Deciding.

‘I have asked you, Anther ... multiple times...’ said Gwendoline, trying to keep her cool, ‘*NOT* to sneak up on people.’

‘Noted. I’ll walk louder,’ he offered in compromise. With a device of his own invention, Ant pulled a cord on his red cloak, forcing it to retract up round his shoulders, and sat down.