

Chapter 1

June 21st, 1593

Magic and mystery—that's what the day of the summer solstice promised, but so far Branwen had only seen sheep. She sighed, leaning on her shepherd's crook as she stared across the sloping fields of her family's pasture. To the west, she could see the bronze steeple of the village church peeking above the tree line, and beyond that, the ancient hill-forest of Bryn Celli Ddu. Pale mist enshrouded the hill's base as the warmth of the morning slowly evaporated the night's dew. Dark trees loomed both foreboding and alluring against the blue-gray sky.

In a few hours, the men and elders from the village of Llanddaniel Bryn would make the trek up through the forest to the stone cairn hidden at its apex. There, they would conduct the binding of Bryn Celli Ddu, a ritual to bless the land and keep evil at bay. As *iachäwr*—village healer—Branwen's mother was the only woman allowed to accompany the sacred procession.

For years, Branwen had wanted to join her, to witness the mystery of the mound in the dark wood. The desire of that knowledge burned a hole inside her. What exactly did the elders do there? Why did they keep it so secret? A full third of the village adults went up to Bryn Celli Ddu every year, yet none of them ever spoke a word about it. Of course, that didn't stop the stories—tales of magic and missing girls, of strange creatures and blood sacrifices. Branwen had heard from neighboring villages that the forest was cursed, that it was the home of the old gods and the faerie folk.

Such tales frightened children, but Branwen had never been scared. As a young girl, she'd listened to all the stories of the fae with fascination, wondering if binding the tomb at Bryn Celli Ddu really did keep the insect-like pixies, toad-skinned kobolds, and shape-changing kelpies at bay. When she'd turned twelve and was finally old enough to apprentice, she'd insisted on training to become an *iachäwr*, too. She'd hoped to walk alongside her mother to the ruins, but each year, the older woman told her to stay behind with the promise of, “Maybe next time.”

Five years, her mother had been saying that. Five years was long enough.

Branwen's grip tightened on her shepherd's crook. *I will go to Bryn Celli Ddu. Today*, she swore to herself. Soon, she knew her mother would send her to the village of Gaerwen or even as far as Bangor to complete the final two years of her training as *iachäwr*. *Two years*. If she didn't discover the secret of Bryn Celli Ddu today, she'd have to wait at least that long for another opportunity.

I feel like I've been waiting my whole life already, Branwen thought. *Seventeen years and I'll finally know the truth...*

One of the sheepdogs barked and Branwen reeled in her gaze just as her older brother Madden approached from the lower field.

"I brought a visitor," Madden told her, his sky-blue eyes twinkling with mischief beneath the blonde haystack of his hair. From behind him, their younger sister Colwen rushed forward. The six-year-old was winded from trying to keep up with her brother's long stride, but that didn't stop her from talking.

"Papa said I could come help watch the sheep," Colwen told Branwen in the span of a single, wheezing breath. She clutched her favorite rag doll in her fist, her fingers tight around the toy's lumpy waist. Its yarn hair was honey-colored and full of cowlicks—just like Colwen's. Two summers ago, Branwen and her sister had made the doll together. They called it Hyll which meant "ugly"—because it *was*—and Colwen loved ugly things.

Branwen smiled. "Good. I needed some help," she told Colwen while giving her brother a sly wink. "Madden can take the dogs and the lambs while you and I stay with the grannies by the creek. How does that sound?"

The grannies were the oldest sheep in the flock—ewes well-past their lambing days, but still valuable for wool production. More importantly, the grannies were the *calmest* of the flock. They wouldn't mind when the six-year-old inevitably ran circles around them, pretending to be a sheepdog. And when Colwen got bored—as Branwen knew she would—the younger girl could venture into the

creek to play while remaining within Branwen's line of sight.

“Sounds perfect,” Madden interjected before Colwen could raise any protests. “Thanks, sis,” he told Branwen, then whistled sharply. The two sheepdogs snapped to attention, gathering up the proper sheep at Madden's command. “Pa said he'll bring the rams up in a little while,” Madden added as he led the flock away. “I'll be in the north field if you need me!”

Of course, Branwen thought. Their family's northern-most pasture shared a fence with the wool-dyer's eastern field where the wild madder root grew...and where Ifanna—her best friend and Madden's fiancée—would be gathering herbs for the solstice festival.

Branwen smiled as she called after her brother, “Tell Ifanna I said hello!” She could see the gleam of Madden's answering grin even from a distance.

“Oh, I will,” he said. A swift breeze carried back the sound of his laughter as he disappeared over the next hill with the sheep.

Branwen laughed, too, pushing back a few dark, wind-snarled curls that had escaped her braid. When she looked up, she saw her sister bolt past her, already heading toward the creek. The grazing sheep scattered out of the little girl's way, but only briefly; the grannies let few things come between them and their food.

“C'mon!” the six-year-old shrieked as she kicked off her shoes. Colwen paused only to tuck Hyll safely behind a rock and out of her splash range before she plunged, skirts and all, into the knee-deep water. “Come play with me!”

Why not? Branwen thought as she glanced back at the sheep. The grannies had returned to their grazing patterns. Half of them even dozed as they ate. They weren't going anywhere.

“I'm coming!” she called as she took long, even strides down the hill, using her shepherd's crook for balance. Near the creek, Branwen jabbed the end of the cane into the soggy ground, then tucked up her skirts and headed for the water.

She crouched by the edge of the creek and thrust both hands into the cool, burbling stream as

she prepared to splash her sister—then she stopped.

Something wasn't right. The water turned to ice against her skin, sending shivers up her arms and down her spine. Further along the creek, she could still see Colwen tromping through the water, still hear her laughing as she chased tiny minnows. Nothing seemed amiss and yet....

Branwen looked down at her hands again. Then she saw it—no, *them*. Paw prints in the creek bank. Fresh ones. Big ones. Too big to belong to a sheepdog. *Much* too big. If she didn't know better, she would think they had come from a—

Wolf! The word yelped in Branwen's mind. Her heart pounded in her chest even as she told herself, *That's impossible—the last wolves were hunted to extinction nearly a hundred years ago! They're just stories now, like all the tales of Bryn Celli Ddu.* Still, she leapt to her feet.

Behind her, the sheep started bleating—softly at first, then more frantic. She glanced back and saw them all huddled together, seeking protection in numbers. A few feet upstream and to her left, she saw Colwen. The six-year-old was no longer splashing through the water, but stood stock-still and stared into the bushes at the far edge of the creek. From her angle, Branwen couldn't tell what Colwen was looking at, but she could see fear ripple through her sister's body.

Colwen screamed.

A lean, dark shape lunged from the bushes. Amber eyes burned within a body of living shadows, and Branwen dashed forward, desperately trying to thrust herself between the black beast and her sister. She made a huge splash as she landed in the knee-deep creek. The shadow-creature flinched away from the sudden sound and surge of water, hissing and spitting as it darted out of her range.

Wolves don't hiss! The thought rang like a gong in Branwen's mind and she felt the cold dread of its warning seep into her bones. Instinct had already told her this creature couldn't be an ordinary wolf, but she'd let her rational mind hold sway and now she didn't have time to waste being surprised. She plowed through the water, making as much commotion as possible to keep the beast at bay until she could reach her sister. Only a few feet away, Colwen stood utterly motionless in the middle of the

creek, her mouth gaping wide as she continued to scream.

Branwen clamped her hands on her little sister's shoulders, cutting the younger girl's shriek short as she yanked her to the side. Then, Branwen stepped in front, using her own body as a shield to block the shadow-wolf's access to Colwen. She stomped her feet in the creek and flailed her arms through the water, splashing as much of it as she could at the beast, trying to drive it back.

“Get!” Branwen shouted, her voice pitched low and commanding as though she addressed a disobedient sheepdog. “Go!”

But the shadow-wolf didn't move any further away—it only skittered from side to side, becoming more successful at dodging the arcs of water Branwen flung at it. Any moment now the beast would catch her rhythm, she knew, and then it would be the *wolf's* time to attack.

I can't let that happen! Branwen thought, her mind scrambling for another option. *I have to move—now!*

“Colwen, run!” she bellowed even as she hurled herself toward the wolf. She didn't have time to turn and look, but for once, she knew her sister obeyed. She could hear the girl's desperate splashing as she bolted for the shore. She could smell the musty scent of churned earth as Colwen's bare feet dug into the muddy embankment. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see a flash of honey-blonde against white and green when her sister finally raced up the hill from the creek. The sheep fled ahead of her.

The shadow-wolf caught the movement, too, but just as its gaze shifted to follow Colwen, Branwen shouted, raking her hands through the water and slinging it at the beast's face.

WHOOSH!

A blast of heat and steam exploded from around the wolf, nearly blinding Branwen, and she staggered back, blinking desperately to clear the fog from her vision. She couldn't see for all the vapor in the air, but she could hear the shadow-wolf—hissing and howling in agony. The sound made her skin crawl and the marrow of her bones ache.

What just happened? For a moment she stood, too stunned to move. Her muscles strained against the eastern flow of the creek as she realized, *It doesn't matter—now's my chance to run!*

Before she could pivot toward the shore, two glowing amber eyes cut through the lingering mist. Their harsh light burned like twin will-o'-the-wisps, beckoning Branwen to follow them to her doom. She stared in horror as the steam faded, revealing the full effect of her attack.

Red-charred skin peeled back from the side of the wolf's face and head where the water had splashed, exposing the layers of muscle and bone beneath. The gray-white dome of its skull glistened under the early morning sun, and the beast's teeth gleamed between the shreds of its jaw muscles. Smoke rose from chunks of black fur still stubbornly clinging to the creature's flesh; the white tendrils hissed as residual heat escaped.

That's the sound I heard earlier, Branwen suddenly understood. It wasn't the wolf hissing, but the sound of water dissolving fur and skin and bone. Only then did she remember an ancient saying still recited by some of the grandmothers in her village—“running water drives away evil.” *But if that's completely true, then why is that thing still here?* Branwen questioned.

Impossibly, the shadow-wolf walked toward her. Its massive paws gouged deep ruts into the mud along the creek bank, though it was careful never to touch the water. The beast's red tongue lolled out of the burned side of its mouth, panting hungrily, and its eyes smoldered with hatred.

Is this it? Branwen wondered as the wolf marched inexorably forward. *Is this the face of Death?* Something within her immediately balked at the notion. Her jaw clenched and she stared back at the shadow-wolf in staunch rebellion.

“This is *not* how I die,” she told the beast. Without taking her eyes off the wolf, Branwen took a step back, deeper into the creek—her fortress and her weapon. She held her arms out wide, palms up as if to say, “Now what?”

The wolf stopped its advance.

Branwen held her breath.

She could see intelligence swirling behind the creature's unearthly eyes. The shadow-wolf tilted its head when it looked at her, reminding her of a sheepdog...if that sheepdog were a nightmarish fiend bent on her personal destruction.

After an agonizing second, the beast seemed to come to a decision, and Branwen watched with her heart in her throat. Her body tensed, ready for anything.

Slowly, the wolf turned, following the trail of its footprints back up the creek.

Is it leaving? she dared to hope. *Have I beaten it? Are we safe?* She thought of Colwen and glanced up the sloping field. Her sister wasn't as far away as she'd expected. *She should be halfway to Madden by now...*

As she watched, Branwen could see the trouble: Colwen's dress. Water-logged from playing in the creek, the thick, woolen garment weighed her down and clung close to her skin, catching between her legs as she tried to run. The six-year-old could only go a few feet before the sagging cloth made her stumble. Despite her struggle, Colwen had nearly made it to the single ash tree at the top of the hill. A few more yards and she'd be over the ridge and out of the shadow-wolf's line of sight. Their ordeal was almost over.

Branwen let out a slow, shuddering breath, turning her gaze back to the wolf. The beast had walked another fifteen feet further up the creek where the waters grew shallow as they neared the source-spring. The creek itself was only three feet wide at the point where the shadow-wolf stopped again, turning perpendicular to the flow of water. Then, it glanced back at Branwen.

The muscles of the creature's maimed jaw stretched into a wicked grin and its fiery amber eyes darted directly to Colwen as she continued to fight her way up the hill. Saliva dripped from the beast's mouth and its red, red tongue ran across its teeth in anticipation.

Branwen could have no doubt that the shadow-wolf's long legs and lean, muscular body would easily overtake her sister. Terror filled her heart. She screamed. "No!"

The wolf jumped across the stream.

Branwen watched in horror as the beast's shadow-swift form raced up the hillside even as she dove toward the shore, clawing her way up the embankment.

“Colwen!” Her sister's name ripped from her throat, piercing the air, and the younger girl glanced back. Branwen saw her gait falter briefly and knew she'd seen the beast gaining on her. “Don't stop!” Branwen shouted, her own legs pumping as fast they could, propelling her up the hill. With each billowing breath, she surged forward, taking the hill at an angle in the hopes of intercepting the wolf, but the shadow-creature moved faster still. It would be upon her sister in seconds.

I won't make it. I won't reach Colwen in time. Branwen knew the truth of those words, but she couldn't give up. She had to *do* something—she had to find a way! Her heart pounded in her chest. The sound of it pummeled her eardrums. She could barely hear her own voice as she cried out, “Colwen—the tree!”

In her frantic dash for safety, the six-year-old had nearly passed the solitary ash tree at the top of the hill, but at Branwen's words she stuck out her hand and grasped the trunk. The young girl's momentum slung her around the base of the tree, changing direction too quickly for the wolf to adjust. The beast barreled forward, its teeth snapping on only air as it lunged for where Colwen used to be.

The force of its efforts carried the shadow-creature over the ridge of the hill, and Branwen saw dark chunks of peat and sod go flying as the beast tried to scramble back up the slope. By the time the wolf gained traction, Colwen had managed to clamber halfway up the ash tree. Branwen had never felt more grateful for her sister's adventurous spirit than in that moment when she saw the way the young girl's nimble feet and fingers found easy purchase in the smallest knots and whorls of the tree's tall trunk. The lonely ash had always been Colwen's favorite climbing tree despite their father's warnings against its creaking boughs.

As she ran, Branwen let out a gasp of breath. Faint tendrils of relief coursed through her body. Her lungs burned as fresh air rushed in, driving away the weariness in her chest and legs as she continued to bolt up the interminable hill. The sloped field seemed to stretch on forever, growing

steeper with every stride.

That means I'm nearing the top! Branwen thought, her spirit rejoicing until she realized she had no idea what to do once she got there. She had no weapon to speak of—the stones lying about were too big for throwing and there weren't any conveniently-downed tree limbs to use as a makeshift stave. Her only other option—her shepherd's staff, meant for this very purpose—she'd left down by the creek in her rush to save her sister. She could see it in her mind's eye, jutting from the ground like the great sword Excalibur.

And just as unobtainable, Branwen thought with an internal grimace. At least, the staff was *real*, but it couldn't do her any good from where it stood a hundred yards away. She certainly didn't have time to go back and get it. Her sister had escaped the wolf—for now—but Branwen could see the beast circling beneath the ash tree, clearly preparing for another assault. The wolf's fierce amber eyes never once strayed from Colwen as she climbed further and further up the tree.

Below her, the shadow-wolf stopped circling and approached the tree, stretching its front feet up the base of the ash. Colwen yelped as the wolf made its first attempt to scale the tree. Its teeth snapped at the heel of her dangling foot, but missed, and the beast's black body slid back down the trunk, carving deep fissures into the bark with its claws. The ash tree wept from the injury, leaking sap like lymph from an open wound. The wolf leapt again.

To Branwen, time slowed to a crawl as she watched the shadow-wolf fly through the air. Her own limbs dragged and the wind felt like lead against her skin as she finally crested the hill, but she didn't stop—*couldn't* stop. Her sister needed her!

Colwen yanked her foot up, placing her full weight on the base of the branch as she half-stood, her movements desperate as she tried to haul herself up to the next level and out of the shadow-wolf's reach. She had her torso and one arm slung over the upper boughs when the branch beneath her cracked and fell. The sound of it roared in Branwen's ears like thunder.

“NO!” Branwen's own shout drowned under Colwen's shriek of terror. The six-year-old clung to

the higher branch, her fingers white with the strain. The sodden wool of her skirt weighed her down, making it impossible for her to pull herself into the upper boughs without support from below. Her body swayed from side to side and her bare feet peddled the air, blindly searching for a new foothold.

When the traitor-branch fell, it collided with the shadow-wolf, knocking the creature to the ground, but the beast recovered quickly. It scuttled out from beneath the leafy cage of the branch, then used the girth of the fallen limb as a step to launch itself higher up the tree.

Branwen couldn't allow it to get that far. *I have no weapon—I am the weapon*, she thought and without hesitation flung herself at the wolf. Her arms latched around the creature's chest, then she threw herself backward as hard as she could, using the force of her own weight to reverse their momentum. Despite the beast's impressive size, it had barely any mass at all—as though it were truly formed of nothing but smoke and shadows. Branwen had no trouble letting gravity and the natural slope of the hill take over, tumbling them back toward the creek. She ducked her head as she rolled, keeping herself shielded as best she could against the frenzy of tooth and claw. Behind her, she could hear Colwen screaming for Papa, Madden—*anyone*—to help, but Branwen knew they were all too far away.

The wolf snarled, turning its head to snap at her face, but in the tumult it only managed to tangle its teeth in the thick braid of her hair. Dark strands ripped from her scalp as the beast yanked its mouth free. The shadow-wolf broke her grasp then, and tried to scramble to its feet, but Branwen didn't let it. She lunged after the creature, throwing herself onto its back once more in an attempt to pin it to the ground. The beast twisted beneath her and sent them both rolling further down the hill.

Branwen clung to its back, digging her hands into the wolf's shadow-black coat. Its fur slid between her fingers like oil. She nearly lost her grip, but fear turned her hold into a vice. If she let go of the beast now, it would turn on her, ripping her face and arms to shreds. And when it had finished with her, it would dart up the hill and vault into the ash tree after Colwen. In her mind, she could already hear her little sister screaming, could imagine the soft, wet squelch of the wolf at her throat, followed

by earth-shattering silence.

I can't let that happen! Branwen thought in a panic. She needed to get the shadow-wolf as far away from her sister as possible and, once she did, she needed a way to *fight back*.

Her eyes widened, desperately trying to glimpse her surroundings as she and the wolf continued to tumble down the hill. The world spun by in waves of color: green, blue, black.

Grass, sky, shadow. Then—*yes!*

Only a few feet away, she could see the large stone by the creek, and next to it, her shepherd's crook, gleaming like a ray of golden hope in the sunlight. *That's it!* She hooked one arm around the shadow-wolf's chest and threw her weight forward and to the side, forcing their locked forms to accelerate and veer to the left. One, two, three rolls and then—*crack!*

The beast's breastbone slammed directly against the rock, stunning it for one vital second.

Branwen didn't waste any time. She fell off the wolf, scrambling back on her heels, her arms reaching out behind her. She didn't dare take her eyes off the shadow-beast as she frantically searched for her shepherd's staff, but her hands patted only grass.

She couldn't understand. It had been right *there*—why couldn't she find it? The tip of her finger bounced against something solid and she grabbed it, squeezing tight. Her heart plummeted as the object compressed beneath the force of her grip. It wasn't the staff, but she didn't have time to search again—the wolf was rolling to its feet, chest heaving. The shadow-beast lunged at her, mouth wide and gaping, and she thrust the object forward, stuffing it into the wolf's open maw.

The beast's amber eyes bulged in fury and surprise as a bundle of rags and yarn clogged its jaws.

Hyll.

Branwen would have laughed if she hadn't already been on the verge of tears. Her sister's ugly, lumpy doll was lodged in the wolf's mouth, choking it with thick tufts of wool that spewed from ripped seams.

The beast shook its head, flinging the doll aside, and Branwen seized the moment of distraction. Leaping to her feet, she turned and grabbed her shepherd's crook—it had been only an arm's length away the whole time. She brought it to bear just as the shadow-wolf rushed in. The beast's teeth clamped around the staff, leaving deep impressions in the oak shaft instead of Branwen's forearm. She shoved back—hard—jamming her shepherd's crook into the corners of the wolf's mouth, then twisted it back and forth. The motion played on the creature's predatory nature, triggering the instinct to bite down and pull just as it would if rending meat from bone...or like a dog tugging on a piece of rope. Branwen hadn't been sure the trick would work, but she was glad it did—at least for now. Every second she kept the wolf occupied was another second Colwen remained safe, another second bought until help arrived.

Madden *had* to have heard Colwen's cries even in the north field. Regardless, he would have known something was wrong when all the granny-ewes came rushing into the far meadow...wouldn't he?

And Papa, Branwen thought, her muscles straining as she pushed against the wolf. *He should be here soon, bringing up the rams.* She wished. She hoped. She prayed...because she didn't know how much longer she could hold the shadow-beast off.

Purple bruises bloomed along her skin and blood flowed from three gashes atop her left wrist where the wolf's claws had caught sometime during their tussle. Branwen hadn't even felt the injuries happen with everything else going on, but she felt them now. Warm blood trickled down her hand and seeped between her fingers, making her grip on the shepherd's staff slick and wet. The tendons in her wrist quivered with pain and her whole body ached.

One look at the wolf and she knew it could sense her weakness. Its amber eyes gleamed with anticipated victory.

“Oh, no you don't,” Branwen growled, bracing herself for the beast's final assault—but not well enough.

The shadow-wolf released its hold on the shepherd's crook and Branwen stumbled at the sudden lack of opposition. She thrust the end of the staff into the ground to keep from falling, but the action left her wide-open for an attack. The wolf darted forward, teeth bared in a wicked, hungry grin.

Thwak! Out of nowhere, a chestnut-sized rock struck the shadow-beast in the eye. The creature howled and flinched away, giving Branwen time to regain her balance. Looking up, she saw her brother yelling and racing down the hill. He had a shepherd's sling in one hand, loaded with a small, jagged rock. It spun round and round poised for flight. As the wolf began to recover, he loosed the second projectile, bashing the creature on the burned side of its face. The shadow-wolf staggered and Branwen ran toward Madden, trusting her brother to keep the beast off her back. To her left, she heard her father's low voice, shouting, though she couldn't make out the words. The pasture gate clanged shut behind him with the rams, forgotten, on the other side.

Branwen skidded to a halt. "Papa, watch out!" she cried as she saw the wolf's dark shape dart toward the small, swarthy man from across the field.

Her father bent low, charging the beast with his own shepherd's crook raised above his head like a broadsword. He swung the staff down hard, cracking it across the shadow-wolf's shoulders. Madden met their father halfway, pelting the beast with rocks as the older man kept slashing at it with his shepherd's crook. The wolf dodged most of their attacks, but Branwen could see the effort it took as each action wore the creature down bit by bit. She hadn't noticed before in all the commotion, but the wolf favored its left hind leg badly and the burn to its face finally seemed to be taking a toll.

"The water!" Branwen gasped, their path to victory suddenly evident. "Papa, Madden—push it into the water!"

Her father's eyes never once left the wolf, but Madden looked back at Branwen in confusion.

"Just do it!" she shouted, pitching her voice above the sound of Colwen's still-frightened cries behind her. She couldn't comfort her sister—not yet—not until she saw this evil *ended*. Branwen took up her own staff and jogged back down the hill.

The shadow-wolf must have sensed her intent. It took full advantage of Madden's momentary inattention and darted through a gap in his coverage. Branwen's father bolted after the beast, but she knew he could never catch it.

He won't have to, she thought. It's given up on Colwen. Now, it's coming straight for me! She picked up speed until she ran toward the beast, her bones jarring with every step.

Eyes glowing with menace, the shadow-wolf leapt as soon as she was in range, but Branwen was ready. She swung her shepherd's crook with all her might, catching the beast mid-air. Her staff snapped in two with the force of impact, but the wolf's shadow-born body went flying. Branwen ran after it, watching as it landed at the very edge of the embankment. The beast dug its claws into the peat-laden shore, trying to haul itself up from the ledge, but Branwen would have none of it.