



CHAPTER 1

A Remote Mountain Hamlet Outside the Village of Eamsford, 1542



Tackled by bullies and slammed into mud, Charles couldn't know he would soon encounter far more dangerous enemies. In fact, he would travel through space and time to face a power so terrible it threatened to end civilization. But every tale has a beginning. This one begins with a frog.

“Open yer mouth.” Felton Thadwick's heavy knees pinned Charles to the rocky ground.

“No!”

“Open yer mouth. You want yer frog's guts squashed on yer face?”

The smaller boy kept his jaw clenched, his lips tight.

Seamus sneered. “So keep yer mouth closed, yeh prat.” He and Rodrick held Charles's wrists and feet.

“Guts on yer face!” Rodrick cheered. All three bullies wanted to see it.

They weren't bluffing. Charles was faster and usually got away. But this time he had slipped on the riverbank.

Felton squeezed Charles's traumatized frog in his meaty fist. Its insides squished. Its eyes bugged out.

Charles couldn't stand it. He closed his eyes and opened his mouth. *At least it isn't a spider.*

Seamus and Rodrick trembled with excitement. Felton stuffed the terrified frog into Charles's mouth, rear end first.

The boy gagged.

"Got somethin' to say in yer stupid accent? Close yer mouth! Careful — yeh'll bite its head off!"

Charles fought the urge to vomit.

Felton pushed on Charles's jaw, squeezing the frog harder. All three Idiot Brothers roared.

"One punch to the chin, Orphan Boy, and it's double pleasure fer me — I get to punch yeh, *and* watch yeh bite the head off a frog." Felton wound up.

Charles braced himself. *I should have left the frog behind. Grandfather will be furious.*

"Hey, Fatty!" A voice yelled before the punch came. Felton froze. He looked up. "Yeah, you, *Fatty!* Why don't you pick on somebody your own size? Oh, *right!* Because there *aren't* any kids your size, you bloated, chicken-bully *loser!*"

Chicken-bully? Loser? The Idiot Brothers peered into the bushes, stunned. That was a *girl's* voice. And it wasn't local.

Charles strained to see. Who dared challenge Felton Thadwick? He tried to wriggle the frog out of his mouth, but Felton jammed it in deeper.

"Where are yeh?" Felton demanded, still peering into the woods. "*Who* are yeh?"

Silence.

Pinned on his back, Charles could only look up. Suddenly, in the tree above, a creature he'd never seen before crept through the branches, camouflaged in the thick leaves. He

wanted to scream, but he couldn't because of the frog in his mouth.

Blending into the rough bark, the creature descended the tree with the grace and silence of a panther. As it inched closer, Charles almost choked.

It *was* a girl.

Her mouth moved, but her voice came from a bush off to the left.

"Over here, Fatty!" Felton spun to follow the sound. "No, this way!" Her voice jumped again from a tree to the right, then from a sapling directly ahead.

She crept up behind the Idiot Brothers, throwing her voice to distract them. The leafy pattern on her clothes and skin made her almost invisible, but Charles could still see her raise one finger to her lips to silence him.

"Bullies never change, Fatty." Her accent was unrecognizable. "You're all the same — cowards. *Three* of you ganged up on one kid half your size. But if you had the guts to fight fair, you wouldn't be a bully, would you, *Fatty*?"

Felton was red with rage. "Go *do* something!" he shouted at Seamus and Rodrick. They looked at him uncertainly. Seamus started to run.

Then the mysterious girl struck.

She grabbed Seamus by the neck and yanked him backward, flinging him straight into Rodrick. Both boys crumpled.

Charles squirmed against Felton's grip but still couldn't move. Seamus and Rodrick scrambled up and tried to run, but they weren't fast enough. Seamus yowled as they flew through the air. *Splash!* Straight into the river.

Who *was* she?

Felton was sweating hard. Salty drops spattered Charles's face. The second Felton's grip relaxed, Charles spat out the frog. "Run while you can, Thadwick!"

"Big words," Felton shot back at Charles. "Yer the one on the ground."

"Not for long," said the girl. "I'd listen to him, *Fatwick*. Running would be a good idea right now, *coward!*"

Felton bolted.

Charles coughed out the last of the frog slime, then wiped his face. The silence unnerved him. *Am I next?*

A pair of bare brown feet appeared. It took all his courage to look up at her face.

She was unlike anyone he'd ever seen. The leafy pattern that disguised her had changed. Her face was now light brown, like tea with milk. Her long, dark hair was luxurious and thick, and she stepped so lightly she almost seemed to float. The suit she wore was all one piece, and it clung to her body like a second skin. Was she a traveling acrobat?

"My name's Geneva." She held out her hand.

He took it and stood. She was maybe fourteen or fifteen — not much older or bigger than he was. How had she done that?

"Thank you," he said shyly. "I'm Charles."

"Charles, huh?" She grinned. "That's a little formal, don't you think?"

"Formal?" *She's pretty*, he thought, *and exotic*. Her high cheekbones, blue-gray eyes, and tea-colored skin were a sharp contrast to his freckles and sandy brown hair.

"Yeah, Charles. Are you a prince? *Charles* is a name for a king, don't you think? Or an old man."

Well, that was rude!