

# ISOBELLE CARMODY

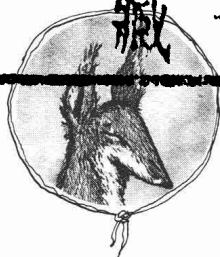


a fox called sorrow  
*The Legend of Little Fur*

ISOBELLE  
CAMDEN

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a fox called sorrow

*The Legend of Little Fur*

Book 2

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# *For my elfin girl*

VIKING

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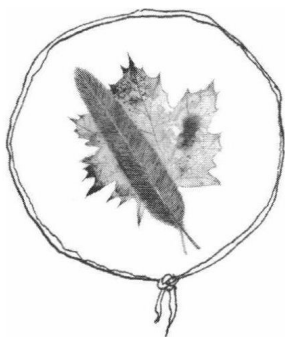
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## CHAPTER 1

### *A Storm of Omens*

It was autumn, and as sometimes happens in that season of heavy golden light and falling leaves, a powerful storm began to brew itself. It sucked up secrets and hidden purposes like leaves, flinging them into the air as omens.

Humans, blind and deaf to all but their own desires, could not easily read such signs. But on this night, children tossed in their beds and threw up an arm as if to ward off a blow. Greeps – those humans whose minds were dimmed and corrupted by their strange, dreadful appetites – had

a blurred awareness that something bad was coming. But they felt only a twisted and ugly pleasure at the thought that someone else might suffer.

Wild creatures living within the city in crannies or forgotten nooks, and even some of the tame beasts dwelling with humans, sensed the warnings that churned in the air. But most responded with no more than a surge of instinct. Squirrels rushed to check their secret hoards and rabbits examined the roofs of their burrows; ants rushed hither and thither; birds fortified their nests and turned their eggs anxiously.

But a dog chained in a bare stone yard sensed the rage and hatred in the omens. Half insane from thirst and mistreatment, it began pulling ferociously at its bonds, ignoring the chafing of the collar fastened about its neck.

In the city zoo, a lion roared and would not be soothed no matter how much bloody meat its keeper gave it, and two panthers wove about one another in a tapestry of apprehension. In another



enclosure, a frenzy of monkeys mimicked the violence they scented in the wind.

A half-starved fox was limping towards the outskirts of the sprawling grey city over which the storm spread its black and ragged wings.



It stopped to sniff at the wind and read the warnings and signals. But its anguish was so great that if the world were to end it would not have minded. It limped on.

Those few creatures left over from a previous age could read the omens clearly, for they had been born when all honoured the wind, knowing it for a great herald. But such omens wanted brooding upon to be properly understood.

A pixie, who dwelt at the edge of the inland city over which the storm churned, paused in the grooming of his beloved tree to stare at the clouds. He was troubled by the knowledge that by morning the russet glory of its leaves would be torn away. But the roots of the tree ran very deep and there would be new leaves in spring. He touched the leaves tenderly, turning his back on the clouds and their omens.

A boil of trolls at the mouth of a pipe leaking poisonous filth saw the lurid slash of light along the underside of bruised-looking clouds, and fell to hissing and cackling in delight.



Only one being sought to unravel the signs. Not a creature from a past age of the world, but a crippled, raggedy owl that dwelt in a church. This was no ordinary church. Raised at the very cusp of the last age, it was a place where humans had brought hope for hundreds of years. So powerful was the accumulation of their longing, that a still

and potent magic had pooled there. The owl, who had retreated, wounded, to this beaked house many years before, was saturated in it.

The storm rattled the shingles on the steeple and ancient beams began to strain and warp. The owl tilted her head and listened. She watched the stained-glass windows flash with brief, sharp daggers of storm light. Gradually the Sett Owl, called so out of reverence by the many creatures who came to seek her wisdom, understood. The vital earth spirit, which seeks to unite all living things just as a mother strives for peace among her children, would soon face a terrible danger. The owl was not surprised to discover that the troll king lay behind the threat. But try as she might, she could not discover what form the threat would take.

The magic within the church allowed her to dip into the flow of earth magic, and commune with the earth spirit. The owl learned more of the darkness that loomed, but little of what might be done to prevent it. Yet the earth spirit offered



the fragile and unimaginably sweet scent of hope, not only for the world, or for this city where trees once sang, but for the owl who listened.

The Sett Owl was very old, even among her long-lived kind. She longed to pass from life and join the world's dream, but the still magic of the beaked house would not permit it. She must wait until one came who would take her place. The earth spirit had spoken of that one. But in the meantime, she must concern herself with the danger that the storm foretold.

There was a loud crack of thunder. The earth magic that flowed about the beaked house surged and the Sett Owl had a clear, bright vision of the elf troll, Little Fur. Small as a three-year-old human, with pointed ears and a wild tangle of brambling red hair, the gentle healer dwelt in a secret wilderness within the city, hidden from human eyes by seven magical trees. Once she had undergone a perilous quest to protect those ancient trees, whom she called the Old Ones. At first the Sett Owl thought the vision meant that

Little Fur must again sally forth on behalf of the earth spirit. Then she realised that the elf troll was not the answer to the danger foretold by the storm, but the *reason* for the troll king's plotting. The owl considered summoning the healer, but at once abandoned the idea. What would she say? It was not as if Little Fur had done anything wrong. Indeed the opposite was true.

The Sett Owl did not try to question the earth spirit further about the healer because, where the elf troll was concerned, the earth spirit would make no predictions. Perhaps it was because her parents had been a troll and an elf; whatever the reason, Little Fur possessed a quality that was truly strange – she was *random*.

The owl gave a wheezy sigh and wished that these matters might have waited for her successor, but it was not to be.

Well, the earth spirit had urged her to seek knowledge. If she could amass enough small pieces of information, perhaps she would get a clearer picture of what the troll king planned.

Not far away, the storm front approached the hidden wilderness, but Little Fur did not notice the darkening sky, let alone the omens and signs driven before the storm. She was trying to remove a grass seed from the badly infected paw of a racoon. There were two rabbits, a mouse, three birds and a hedgehog awaiting her attention and her stomach was rumbling with hunger, for she had eaten nothing since the morning.

She was concentrating so hard that she did not notice the rain beginning to fall, nor its queer bitter taste.

She had managed to work the grass seed out and was gently rubbing in salve to treat the infection, when the drops of rain began to fall with a force that scattered her remaining patients. Little Fur scooped up the racoon and retreated under the branches of the nearest tree. In spring, the tree's thick foliage would have provided good cover, but it was autumn and its few remaining leaves were being harvested by the rising wind and slashing rain. Alone, she would have hurried



through the rain to the top of the hill that rose behind her, pushed through the crown of brambles at its summit and dashed down the steep winding rabbit track into the valley where the Old Ones grew. Beneath their dense, magical canopy, she would be safe from any storm.

But the racoon was too heavy to carry far and



she could not leave it. Little Fur knew, as any true healer does, that mending the flesh is only half of the task of healing a wound or sickness. Carrying the small animal carefully, she picked her way between the trees, staying under cover as best she could until she reached a hollow tree. She climbed into its belly, settled the racoon and began to croon a song to its spirit.

Gazing out at the sky as she sang, Little Fur noticed the mass of black thunderheads rising like phantom mountains above the trees. Lightning lashed across the sky illuminating the distant outcrop of human high houses behind the low dwellings of the older parts of the city. The shining towers showed no sign of bending before the fury of the storm – only things that were alive had the sense to bow before such a force. The high houses looked impervious to the storm, whereas all about her in the wilderness trees bent and creaked and lashed their branches, yet it would be the city that suffered the greatest damage. Many of the numerous small animals and birds that dwelt in