FEATHER VANE

Books by Beth O'Brien

WOLF SIREN

FEATHER VANE



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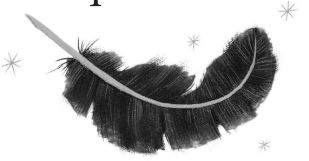
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To Joel, I guess

Chapter One



Morfran

'I am resident nowhere'

– Paracelsus

Thanks to my feathers, I've never felt the cold as badly as my mum or sister. Mum was striding off ahead, like always, her long cloak flapping behind her as though, like us, it was struggling to keep up. It was springtime, but you wouldn't know it from the way my twin sister held her body so tense and huddled into her own cloak. Creirwy is not covered in blue-black feathers like I am. Instead, her arms have short fair hairs. They reflect the sunlight back at the sky, but they do not protect her from the cold like my feathers do.

Creirwy rubbed her numb hands together the way

you would over a fire, only we had no fire because we were walking. We had been walking for a long time. And Mum, who doesn't have feathers either, wasn't showing any signs of slowing down as she led the way with all our worldly belongings bobbing along beside her in mid-air.

There are strict rules against using magic on another living being, whether they be magical creature or human, which is why my mum could make all our things levitate and save us the bother of carrying them, but couldn't brew Creirwy a potion to keep her snug.

There were ways around this, if only Mum had thought about it. But her mind always seemed to be on other people's problems. That was when I decided that as soon as I turned thirteen, in just a few days, and was finally allowed to brew my own magic, I would make a warming potion. I couldn't put the warming potion on Creirwy herself, but I could put it on her coat. I could already imagine Creirwy's voice correcting me: *Its proper name is a Calid Concoction, Morfran; you know that*. I smiled to myself. Sometimes I got things wrong just to annoy her, but more often than not, we simply disagreed on what counted as important enough to memorise.

The blackthorn that covered the hillside was blooming with white blossoms and it looked like a fresh blanket of snow. But as the slope of the hillside turned into a sharp incline, we soon became hot with the climb and I was grateful for the unusually cool spring air.

'Not far now,' said Mum without glancing back over her shoulder. 'We'll stop when we get to the top.'

I didn't have any breath to spare to reply, but apparently Creirwy did.

'Can you wait a moment, please?' she called. Mum didn't stop and it was possible she hadn't heard, so Creirwy jogged to draw level with her and tugged on the sleeve of her cloak.

'What is it?' Mum sounded more than a little impatient. Now she had stopped walking, our luggage stopped moving too. Creirwy tucked her long red hair behind her ears and then hauled herself on to a large levitating wooden case. She sat there cross-legged with her hands folded neatly in her lap.

'Thank you. I'm ready now!' Creirwy grinned. Mum rolled her eyes but smiled begrudgingly as she set off again, now with Creirwy bobbing along beside her too.

'Walking is good for you, you know,' said Mum.

'I know, and I've done *loads* of it. So now I'm resting,' said Creirwy. Her voice was sweet but there was a glint of quiet delight in her eyes. Mum couldn't argue anyway, and Creirwy floated along, plying her with questions about the place that was to be our next home.

I hung back. I didn't want to be drawn into that conversation. Creirwy was so excited to reach the village of Greeth-Under-Edge and I didn't have it in me to pretend to be excited too.

We'd moved homes more times than I have cared to count. Not because we wanted to, but because Mum worked for the Consort of Paracelsus. The Consort was named after a long-dead alchemist and potioneer and it governed the whole magical community to make sure magic and non-magic beings – who we called nulluses – co-existed in gentle harmony. As far as I could tell, all this meant was that Mum was sent all over the country to resolve magical issues that were disrupting nullus life. Sometimes it was a magical creature that had taken up residence somewhere it shouldn't and needed to be expelled – a grumpy troll under a bridge or a

clurichaun sneaking into a tavern and helping itself to ale. Sometimes other potioneers caused the problems. One time, we were sent to a town where a potioneer had placed flying potions on a dozen sailing boats. The idea was, they'd be able to 'sail' goods through the air. The trouble was that they had no idea how to land and were stranded in the sky.

So, although the Consort and Mum did their best to maintain harmony between magic and nullus beings, it seemed that wherever we went, nullus folk were always furious about the magic disrupting their lives and frightened that more magic would only make it worse. Most nulluses had never even met a potioneer before we arrived (unless one had already failed to fix their magical problem, or they lived in Diov City where the Consort's chambers were). Mum was famous for her potioneering ability, so she was sent to deal with the trickiest issues or to clear up after other potioneers made the biggest mess. Her arrival calmed them . . . but my presence, my feathers, did not.

No one, not even Mum, knew how I came to be born with feathers, but whatever magic was involved seemed to hang around me like a scent, like an aura I could not

escape. Before I took to hiding, I could generally tell just how frightened the nulluses were of magic based on how they reacted to me. Sometimes I'd be thrown darting looks that landed on me like boiling droplets spat from a bubbling cauldron. Unpleasant, but bearable.

Then there were the other times.

When I was six, in a town being torn apart bit by bit by a furious poltergeist, Mum found me being chased by a gang of shrieking children, stones in their fists ready for hurling. I'd seen my mum angry before, but I'd never seen her rage take over like it did that day. She turned all of the shrieking children into squeaking mice. That part might have been funny if it wasn't so serious. By using a potion on living beings, Mum had broken the Code of Magic. The whole town went from being scared of the magical creature destroying their lives and livelihoods to being afraid of the magic and magicians there to save them too.

Mum was taken away by the Consort (along with the mice, which had to be turned back into children and returned to their families). The hours without Mum were not good. We'd never been without her, ever. But luckily

Mum was allowed to come back to us that evening. She said it was because me and Creirwy were so young, though I think they just needed Mum's magical abilities, as we were soon packed up and sent to a sea-ravaged coastal village where Mum had to expel a hippocampus, a huge sea creature that has the head and torso of a horse, but the lower body of a fish, which two potioneers had already failed to banish.

The second time Mum breached the rules was when I was eight. By then, I'd learned my lesson and hid even more carefully when I could feel tensions were already high. I'd climbed up into a tall, thick-leaved apple tree, completely hidden, so I thought. But the man who owned the orchard had spotted me climbing and came to chase me away. At first he seemed content to wait, knowing I couldn't stay up there forever. But his patience ran out before my fear and he shook the branches so hard that I slipped sideways and was only clinging on with one hand. By that time, I'd been gone so long that Creirwy had come looking for me, saw what was happening and ran for Mum, and she arrived in a rage. She stuck

the man's hands to the bark of the tree so he couldn't let go and told him he could see how he liked being trapped there.

Again, Mum was taken by the Consort. As it was her second breach, they kept her longer than before. Creirwy had to go around asking nullus people for food for the two of us. What Mum had done to the orchard owner had spread through the town like salamander flames, so though we never spoke about it, we both knew that it was better for Creirwy to do this alone. People take to Creirwy as quickly as they take against me. I usually had to try my best not to let this bother me, but that time I was grateful for it.

When Mum was released, the Consort made it clear that a third breach of the rules would mean she would be punished harshly. This was bad enough and made worse by Mum's stubborn raging that she'd do it again in a heartbeat if she had to.

But there hadn't been a third time, because even if Mum hadn't managed to teach the nulluses their lesson – or learned one of her own – I'd learned mine and made sure I stayed out of sight, so she wouldn't be tempted to defend me with magic again.

It was easier that way. Safer. Not just for me, but for all of us.

Everything was fine when it was just me, Mum and Creirwy. They were used to my feathers – Creirwy even told me that they were beautiful. Although sometimes I thought she only told me that to make up for all the times that people have called *her* beautiful in my hearing. I still learned my mum's magic, doing my best to remember which kind of metal cauldron was needed for which potion, and what kind of tree wood was needed to fuel the fire. I collected ingredients, chopped and stirred, even read and transcribed recipes – all of it. But whenever nullus people came calling I slipped away and left Mum and Creirwy to meet them alone.

But that was about to change.

The moment Creirwy and I turned thirteen, we'd be not only allowed, but expected, to use magic. The Consort of Paracelsus would start sending us scrolls with magical tasks of our own, and that meant avoiding nulluses would become impossible.

The very thought made me want to run and keep running to a place far away from everything that

reminded me of people – their buildings, streets, carts, racket and stench.

But up ahead, Creirwy was delightedly listing all the potions she was most excited to brew, discoveries she planned to make and ground she wanted to break, which sounds bad but is good, apparently.

I dropped back even further, glancing around warily for a sign of the village of Greeth-Under-Edge, but with some relief I still saw nothing but wild countryside.

I only caught up with Mum and Creirwy again when they came to a stop on a plateau of flat, chalky ground. The hill rose up into a jagged and unclimbable peak above us and to our left was a dense cluster of trees.

'What do you think?' asked Mum, inspecting the frankly desolate place.

'It's . . . got a nice view,' said Creirwy with the air of trying to find a bright side, as she turned her back on the sharp peak and stared out over the rolling fields. She was not wrong. The dark green forest rustled below us, and a river shimmered like a blue snake in the distance.

'But where's the village?' I asked, peering warily about.

'It's a way down there somewhere.' Mum waved a vague hand in the direction of the river and I felt lighter

knowing the village wasn't close by. 'But we must settle in here first before we go and introduce ourselves,' Mum went on.

I exchanged a glance with Creirwy. Looking at the powdery white rock of what was supposed to be our new home, neither of us wanted to be the one to point out the obvious problem – there was no house, hut, or any kind of shelter in sight.

But Mum was already rummaging within the folds of her cloak and the clinking sound gave away the fact that it was lined with rows of little pockets for storing potions.

She held up a phial to the light and the contents inside swirled downwards in a burrowing spiral as though trying to wiggle its way through the bottom.

'Stand back, you two.'

I retreated several paces. Creirwy made to join me, dragging a huge and heavy crate with her. I didn't need to read the label on the side of the box to know that Creirwy's beanstalks were inside it. I helped her drag them out of the way.

Mum unstoppered the phial with a pop and then carefully approached the wall of solid stone. She poured a drop here and a drop there, flitting from left to right as

she got a feel for the strength of the magic she was using. She made it look easy, but it wasn't. There was no one else alive who could perform this magic like my mum. With each drop that touched the stone, it was as though the drops themselves began to dig. They tunnelled deep holes into the side of the hill, hollowing out two windows and an archway that led to a newly formed cave inside. Mum ducked in and placed a drop on the ceiling, and seconds later a chimney flue was carved out of the rock, opening at the very top of the sharp peak. I was desperate to go and investigate the inside of the cave but Mum was not done yet and I knew better than to get in her way. She drew out another bottle, which appeared to be full of liquid sand. Mum gave it a vigorous shake and the liquid turned clear, then she poured the entire contents of it on the rocky ledges of the new windows. Instantly, glass grew like leaves, just narrow shoots at first which then unfurled widely until they met the stone window frames. While I was watching this, Mum had used a third bottle to conjure up a door.

All three of us now stood before something that was not quite a typical house but was certainly much more than a cave.

‘There we are!’ said Mum, as though she’d done nothing more complicated than hanging up a painting. She pulled out a key and although there was no visible lock on the door, the metal sank into the wood as though it was made of water. Mum gave the key a twist and the door sprang open.

I hurried inside, leaving Creirwy to begin unpacking her beanstalks. I had to move fast because our luggage was making a dash for the door too. I got in just ahead and ducked low in time to avoid a glass-fronted bookshelf whacking me over the head.

The cave was vast, extending far back into the hill. There were stairs that led to an upper, balconied floor and two archways off the first room that led to two side rooms. A pantry and kitchen. There were two fireplaces along the right-hand wall: one for cooking and one for potions.

The rest of the cave walls were lined with empty shelves cut out of the rock. They weren’t empty for long, however, as cauldrons of every size, shape and metal flew out of Mum’s many boxes and began to arrange themselves on the shelves, jostling and bumping each other for position with soft clangs and clanks.

Mum made sure her books, ingredients and pre-mixed potions were stored safely, then poured a bottle of what looked like molten lava into the large grate, making a roaring fire spring to life at once, which cast a flickering golden glow over our new home.

If I didn't think too much about the village of nulluses we were here to help, I found myself feeling quite happy with our new set-up, which for me at least, was progress.

'Mum, can I go and look around?' I asked. Every time we arrived somewhere new, the first thing I did was find a hideout. Sometimes it was up a leafy tree, sometimes a long grass meadow in which I could lie for hours without being seen. In the last city, it had been the loft. It was a place I could retreat to, unseen and safe.

'Yes.' She was already flicking through a thick tome of old recipes, the Consort's scroll containing the details of her task in Greeth-Under-Edge unfurled on the table beside her. I glanced at it, then away again quickly. It was not my scroll, I did not care what it said and I didn't want Mum to think that I was interested. From the moment it arrived, she and Creirwy had acted strangely, so I knew there had to

be something different about it. But I didn't need the specific details to know that, for me, all it meant was more trouble.

'There's a stream somewhere close by; see if you can find it for us,' said Mum, interrupting my thoughts. She still didn't look up, and I made for the door. 'But don't be too long,' she added. 'We'll go down to the village before dark.'

I decided to pretend I'd not heard that last bit as I stepped back outside. Creirwy wouldn't want to come with me, so I didn't bother asking her. She'd already unboxed three beanstalks and was inspecting each of them for damage. They looked so strange – not the plants themselves, but the way Creirwy kept them. She and Mum had turned the soil invisible so each stalk looked as though it was floating in its transparent pot.

Creirwy had more beanstalks than I'd even bothered to count, and one of her many ground-breaking plans was to find a way to grow a giant beanstalk that would bring back giants themselves, despite them being extinct. So it was safe to say she'd be busy for a while. I left her to it and turned right, heading into the thicket of trees beside our cave.

When I turned back to look, a plume of purple smoke was already rising from our chimney that stuck up in the air like a pointy elbow. This meant that my chance of getting lost was very slim. But to be sure I wouldn't be back before nightfall and be forced to go down to the village with Mum and Creirwy, I'd give it a good try.