



## PROLOGUE

Nora tapped her wand impatiently on the kitchen table before speaking to Camelin.

‘I’m sure I’m right, Jack Brenin is *The One*.’

‘He can’t be, he’s so small and weedy; he’s supposed to be strong and brave.’

Nora thought for a while before she spoke again.

‘He’s a Brenin.’

‘Well, there has to be a better Brenin than this one.’

‘The prophecy’s quite clear and this Brenin was born on the right night, in the right place and at the right time. The trees have been watching him since he arrived, they seem satisfied he’s *The One*.’

‘The trees could be wrong,’ Camelin mumbled in case he was overheard. He knew how fast word could travel from one tree to another. If Arrana, the ancient Hamadryad, heard him he’d be in big trouble. She lived in the oldest Oak tree in the heart of Glasruhen Forest and was always very well informed.

‘I’m sure he’ll help us. If he doesn’t all will be lost. He’s our last hope and we’re running out of time.’

‘If he’s our last hope we’re doomed.’

As Nora paced up and down the kitchen, the end of her wand began to splutter; red sparks erupted from the tip.

‘We need help, I’m going to write to Elan; she needs to be here.’

As Nora wrote, Camelin hung his head; he knew she was right. Time was running out; Arrana was slowly dying. She was the only Hamadryad left on earth and without her protection, the tree spirits of the forest would eventually fade away and only hollow trees would remain. Unless they found someone willing to help them find a way to open the portal into the Otherworld and bring back new Hamadryad acorns, their own time on Earth would end too. As each year passed, Arrana grew weaker. It would need a very special person to accept the challenges, which lay ahead. Camelin continued to sulk. Jack Brenin had not impressed him.

‘He’s not the kind of boy who’s going to care if the spirit of an ancient oak tree lives or dies’

‘If he passes the test he will.’

There was a long silence. Eventually Nora fished in her pocket and produced a beautiful golden acorn and placed it carefully on the table.

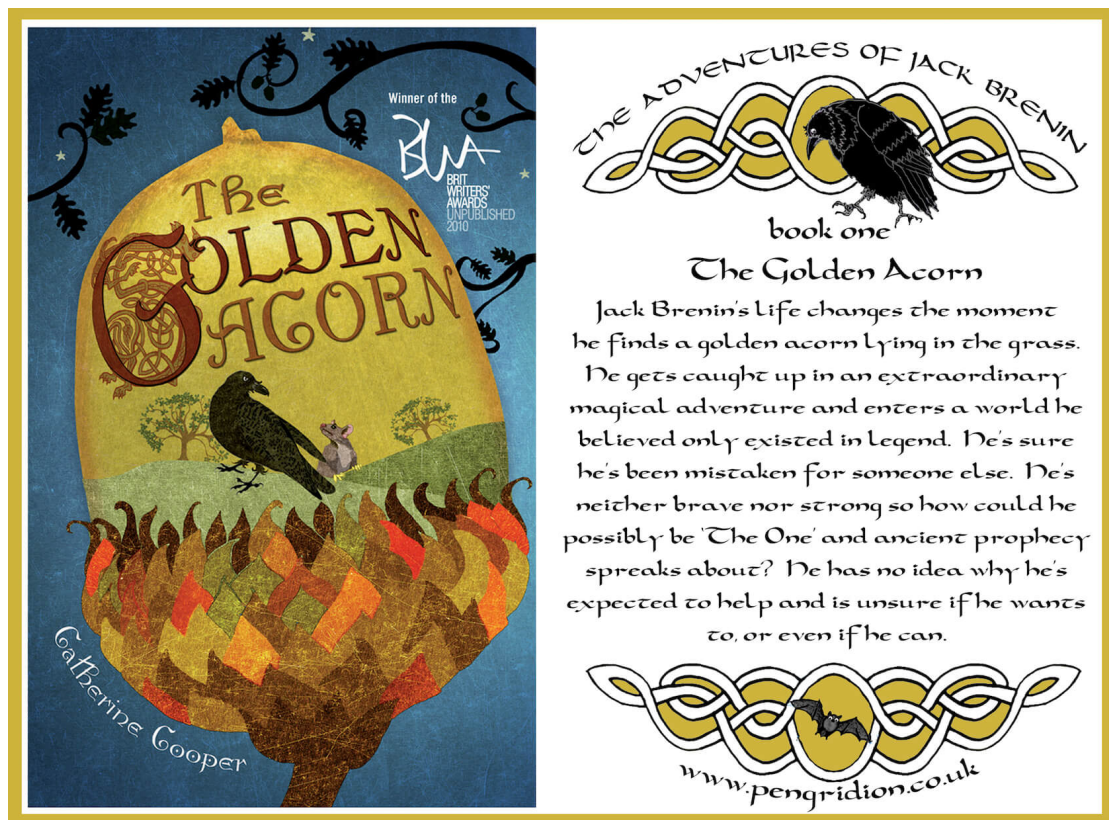
‘Put this where the boy will see it, it’s the only way to be sure.’

‘I bet he kicks it. I was watching him yesterday kicking cans and stones about. What kind of help could he possibly be? The journey we’ve got to make might be dangerous, too dangerous for the likes of Jack Brenin.’

‘Take the acorn, if he sees it and picks it up we’ll know he’s *The One*.’

Camelin scowled. He picked up the golden acorn and reluctantly left the kitchen to find a good place to hide and watch; he might have a long wait. He wasn’t happy; Nora was probably right but Jack Brenin was the furthest thing from a hero he’d ever seen.





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*Catherine Cooper*

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