

**I**n a field full of wild flowers, a boy and a girl stood side by side beneath an ancient oak tree. The sky was angry, the thunder growling like an angry beast.

'Are you ready?' asked the boy nervously.

The girl raised her chin, her wheat-blond hair sweeping down her back in a curtain. 'I've *always* been ready.'

They pressed their palms against the gnarled trunk. The tree began to quiver, its branches stretching as it shook itself awake. There was a brief silence and then a crack exploded above them. A whip of lightning leapt from the clouds and split the centre of the tree in two. Flames erupted along the bark, climbing across the branches and devouring the leaves until everything was a bright, brilliant gold.

'Betty?' said the boy uncertainly. 'Should we –'

'Sssh!' hissed the girl. 'It's about to say something.'

The tree began to whisper. It was much louder than

the boy expected – the crackle and hiss of surrounding flame slowly turning into words. '*Ssssspeak or be sssspoken to.*'

The girl asked her question. As the tree considered it, she grew restless, tapping her fingers against the charred bark. The air grew heavier, a veil of mist curling the strands around her face.

The tree did not speak to the girl again.

