

The Weeping Tower

Dracadonia

Temple of the Dead

Antler Pass



Morbidea's Realm

The Well of the Abyss

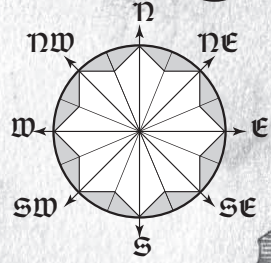
Quill Cavern

Underground Lake

The White Forest



Realm of the Faerie Queen



Loch Skeen

The Grey Mare's Tail

The Voyage of the White Arrow

The faerie forest

Rob Hawks

THE NIGHT OF THE STORM

Fiona watched as the tail was ripped from the fleeing horse, leaving a terrible, bloody and gaping wound.

She sat up gasping for breath, her white knuckles gripping the bed covers. For seven nights in a row Fiona had been startled awake at the same point in this dreadful nightmare. She was trembling with fear and for a moment unsure of where she was. Breathing heavily, she took in her surroundings and was relieved to see her little brother Finn lying safely asleep in the bed beside her. Her breathing calmed slightly. She was glad that it was over, at least for tonight.

Slipping from under the covers she crossed to the window and peered out at the wild winter night. The storm was at its most ferocious. A light from the barn shone feebly in the darkness. She wrapped her shawl around her and tried to shrug off the unsettling images in her mind. Her thoughts turned to the day's work on the farm which had been long and hard. All day they had toiled to prepare for the onslaught of the storm. In the dark, the freezing icy gusts cut and lashed them as they battened down the last of the shutters and finally withdrew into the heart and hearth of the house, bone weary but happy in the knowledge that what needed to be done was done.

Kirsty had accompanied them for most of the day. As a border collie her main task was to make sure that both Finn and Fiona carried out their work in an effective and efficient manner. Alert eyes and ears set above a speckled nose showed an intelligence and determination that would put most farm labourers to shame. Fiona smiled for she loved the dog. She liked her life and living on the farm with her mother and little brother. Why then had she sensed that everything was going to change? She wished Finn would wake up so they could talk. She liked listening to him because he spoke such

nonsense. He was only ten and she knew that when he grew up his nonsense would stop.

When the children had come up to bed Fiona had read Finn a story from the small chapbook their mother had bought them at the market and wondered if the mystical stories of elves, fauns and faeries had anything to do with the nightmares she'd been having. She shivered. Climbing back into bed she snuggled close to Finn to get some warmth. Finn stirred and murmured.

'You hold the giraffe's head. I'll give it the medicine.' Fiona snorted and giggled, even in his sleep Finn talked nonsense. She drifted off reminding herself to ask him what he had been dreaming about.

As dawn broke the freezing anger of the storm subsided into an arctic cold and moody dark morning. The snow lay deep upon the land, huge mounds and drifts covered the walls and outbuildings of the farm. The sky brooded with dark doom-laden clouds. The bare trees sat weary and twisted in the landscape.

As the cockerel crowed Kirsty raced from the fireside to wake the children. She barged into their room and, landing on the bed, aimed her first her collie-tongue-lick at Finn who was lying on his back in the middle of a huge yawn. Kirsty's tongue licked right inside his mouth and her wet nose poked him in the eye.

'Yuck!' yelled Finn trying to sweep the dog off the bed. Kirsty ducked under his arm. Her second lick was aimed at Finn's freckled cheek. Turning to avoid this, Finn got the dog's tongue in his ear along with a snort which practically deafened him.

Kirsty turned her attention to Fiona who had dived under the covers. Incensed at being outwitted, Kirsty yelped and tore at the cover, growling and jumping all over Finn in the process. Finn jack-knifed into a sitting position as Kirsty stomped on him.

'Ow!' he yelled. 'The hairy mutt's stood on my wee man.'

Fiona fell off the bed laughing as their mother entered the room.

'What in the name of goodness is all this nonsense?' asked Kate. 'Kirsty! Come in by.'

Kirsty shot over and sat leaning obediently against Kate's leg.

'I've told you about getting this beast all excited. Now get yourselves dressed. The porridge is over the fire. Once we've had breakfast you'll have to check the animals in the barn and fix any damage that's been caused by the storm.' Kate turned and gently descended the stairs followed by Kirsty.

It was cold in the room and Fiona changed quickly behind the screen which gave her a small area of privacy. She sat on her stool brushing her long red hair, winding it into a bun and pinning it with the whalebone pin her father had carved for her.

'What were you dreaming about?' she asked Finn from behind the screen.

'Do you remember the other night I dreamt I had a pet gorilla?'

'How could I forget that?' laughed Fiona.

'Well, last night I dreamt I got bored with it because all it wanted to do was to pick nits out of my hair, so in the dream I swapped it for a giraffe.'

'It really is quite scary the things that go on in your head,' said Fiona, popping her head round the screen. Finn was still lying in bed. 'Finn get up and get dressed, we've got lots to do today!'

'I am dressed.' He started to pull his nightgown over his head to reveal his everyday clothes underneath. Fiona was horrified.

'Please don't tell me you slept with your clothes on.'

'I got the idea last night,' said Finn. 'It saved me lots of time this morning.'

'You are a clarty wee midden. Don't you dare do that again.'

'Why not? It saves time and I got to stay in bed a little bit longer.'

'I don't care,' argued Fiona. 'I have to share with you. I hope you washed before you put your nightgown on.'

'There's a daft idea too,' Finn argued back. 'What's the point of washing at night when you have to get up and do it again in the morning?'

'I'm not arguing with you, Finn. If you do it again I'll tell Mum and she'll give you a bath in the big tub in front of the fire.'

'All right, I'm only trying to be clever and find ways to save time!'

‘Find ways to be a stinky wee grub, you mean. No wonder you dream about gorillas picking nits out of your hair. Now come on. We need to get breakfast.’

Over in the barn, Meg the grey mare stood silent and uneasy in her stall. She had been awake all through the storm, reliving the supernatural events that had maimed her fourteen years before. She quivered as the barn owl dropped from the rafters, spreading his wings before landing, breaking the back and nipping the neck of a scurrying mouse. He lifted off the floor and alighted on the stall in front of Meg’s face, the mouse hanging from his beak as if it were merely sleeping. Pinning down his morsel he stripped a long piece from its warm, furry body. Blood seeped into the wooden spar of the stall.

In the corner of the shadowy barn, unseen and undetected by the creatures present, lurked the cloaked and hooded figure of a mysterious waiting man.

Chapter 2

31 OCTOBER 1804 — START OF THE STRANGEST DAY

Once downstairs, steaming bowls of porridge and cups of warm milk awaited the children. The fire blazed in the hearth as Finn’s wooden spoon scraped the last morsel from his bowl. He always finished first.

‘Mum,’ he asked ‘will you count my freckles later? I think I’ve got a new one.’

‘I’ll count them tonight at bedtime but I haven’t noticed any new ones.’

‘It’s not fair. I hate having freckles.’

‘Well, you shouldn’t. Freckles are faerie kisses, kisses they only give to the bonniest of babies. They’ll bring you luck.’

‘You are just saying that to make me feel better.’

Fiona was waiting impatiently for the freckle talk to stop. She wanted to ask her mother something much more important.

‘Mum, Tilly Tulloch’s granny says this is the worst winter that anyone can remember.’

Fiona’s statement was calculated to bring her mother out of herself. Kate had seemed preoccupied lately.

‘Is that so?’ Kate stirred the large pot over the fire without looking up.

‘Aye, and she says it’ll get worse. She was talking to big smiddy Jock and he said that the Earth would get as hard as iron, harder than the shoes he was putting on the minister’s cuddy.’

Kate swung the pot around the griddle away from the direct heat of the fire and joined the children at the table. Smiling, she smoothed her apron and tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear.

‘Granny Tulloch’s imagination is famous in these parts. She never could put plain words to things.’

Fiona pressed on despite her mother’s attempts to avoid the subject. ‘She said there was weirdrie in the way the weather had turned.’

‘If there’s weirdrie in anything it’s in Granny Tulloch’s head,’ said Finn. His interruption was intended to be humorous but it was too close to cheek for his mother to let it pass.

‘Finn, if you can’t speak well of your elders then it is best to say nothing at all.’

‘I didn’t mean anything by it mother, it was just a wee joke.’ Finn loved practical jokes and sometimes his love of fun meant he carried things too far.

Fiona was angry that his attempt at humour had stopped her questioning her mother and blurted out, ‘Granny Tulloch said the weirdrie in it was our father’s fault. She said he spoiled the witches’ dance.’

Kate’s voice was firm as she held Fiona’s gaze with determined

hazel eyes. 'That's enough Fiona, we'll not have old wives clishmaclash at this table.'

But Fiona was not to be put off. She could tell from her mother's tone that she was on the right track. 'She said the weather had been dreadful on the seventh solstice and that the fourteenth would see the powers of the dark triumph over good. She said it was our father's fault.'

'That'll do, Fiona.'

'No, it will not do, Mother.' Fiona's anger and frustration had caused her to top her mother vocally and all three were stunned into silence. Finn sat gawping, looking from one to the other. He'd never heard Fiona speak like that to their mother.

Kate repeated herself quietly. 'I said that will do. Your father was a good man, Fiona. We'll not listen to superstitious rumours about him.'

'Mother, what's going on? Everything's different. You're different. The neighbours whisper when they see us in the town; the weather is scary. Something unnatural is happening and everyone thinks it's to do with us.'

Finn was not at all sure about what was going on. He'd not noticed anything unusual apart from the weather being exceptionally bad and Fiona being a bit odd. But she was a girl and an older sister at that. Girls were always behaving in odd ways. All the same, he was beginning to feel a bit uneasy.

'Is Fiona alright, Mum? Has she maybe banged her head? Should I get a poultice in case her brain melts through her ears?'

Rising from the table Kate crossed to the fire and gracefully lowered herself into the armchair. She motioned the children to come and sit on the floor at her feet. Fiona felt the excitement rise inside her. Her mother never sat at the fire after breakfast, there was always too much work to be done. They were always given a list of chores to be tackled right away. Even Finn realised that this day was already beginning to be very different from any he could remember.

The children settled on the warm hearthstone and listened eagerly.

'Fourteen years ago,' Kate began, 'when you were just a baby, Fiona, your father disturbed a coven of witches gathered at Alloway Kirkyard. When the witches spotted your father they chased after him. He rode Meg as fast as she could gallop but the witches caught up with them as he and Meg approached the bridge over the River Doon. You see, witches cannot cross running water. Just as your father raced across the keystone of the bridge one of the witches reached out and caught Meg by the tail ripping it clean off, leaving poor Meg badly wounded.'

'That's my nightmare,' Fiona knelt up gripping her mother's skirt. 'I dream it every night.'

'Your nightmare is real, Fiona.'

'But I never find out what happens next. I wake up just as the witch rips Meg's tail off. How does the nightmare end?'

'It hasn't ended, Fiona. The worst is still to come.'

'So where is Meg's tail now?' asked Finn.

'They say it was taken to a dark and evil land called Dracadonia where it was presented to a Druid queen, the beautiful but deadly Morbidea. A powerful and potent magic was bestowed upon the tail. Tonight, the night of the Samhain, Morbidea will absorb that magic and use it as the key to a mystical portal, the Yett of Abandoned Time, allowing her armies to flood through the portal wreaking vengeance and destruction upon our world.'

'Tonight?' gasped Finn, fear showing in his eyes. 'This will happen tonight?' Finn searched his mother's face for some kind of reassurance but Kate could only nod in response to his question as she stared into the crackling flames of the fire.

'Why do they want to attack our world? What have we ever done to them?' asked Fiona.

'Many thousands of years ago Morbidea's ancestors were part of the elite Druids who ruled the ancient Celtic world. They revered and worshipped Mother Nature. One however, by the name of Morrigan, turned her back on those beliefs and began to learn the secrets of a dark and evil magic. Her followers became known as the

Dark Druids. Mannan, the king of the Celts banished her and those who followed her to the underworld. Morrigan's descendants have searched for ways back, intent on erasing all history of the elite Druids, destroying their stone circles and sacred mounds, eradicating the land and people of their memory for ever. Morrigan is long dead but it is said her descendant, Morbidea, now has the power to open that portal and lead her armies in a war of revenge.'

'Can't anyone stop her?' Fiona asked. 'There must be a way.'

'Our world is about to change, my dears. We will have to survive as best we can.' Kate stood and smoothed her apron as Kirsty lifted her head in anticipation. 'Now we have work to do and we are far enough behind as it is. We'll talk again tonight. Don't worry. I have a plan that will keep you both safe.'

Chapter 3

THE STRANGER IN THE BARN

Fiona opened the cottage door and Kirsty shot out, bounding across the snow-covered yard. The muffled silence was broken only with the sound of Fiona and Finn's feet crunching down into the deep soft snow. A watching raven rasped a warning caw from the roof of the barn and flapped off across the fields, black against the white landscape.

'That was a scary story,' said Finn as he watched the raven soar into the distance.

Fiona said nothing; she was wrapped in her shawl and her thoughts. Finn made a snowball and threw it towards Kirsty. She jumped and caught it in her mouth causing it to disintegrate. Approaching the barn it appeared to have weathered the storm well.

There was no apparent damage although the snow had drifted and piled against the side that had taken the worst of the winds.

Fiona drew back the plank that secured the barn doors. They pulled hard to open it against the drifted snow, giving them enough room to slip through. Meg and the other animals turned their heads as they entered.

'One of us who isn't me will have to clean out the manure,' smirked Finn. Fiona forced a smile back at Finn as they set about their daily routine. Kirsty made a quick check of all the stalls sniffing as she went. Finn climbed up onto Meg's stall and gave the grey mare a scratch behind the ears.

'There you go, girl,' he said feeding her a carrot. Fiona picked up a pitchfork and began piling hay into the feeding troughs as Finn cleaned out the stalls, shovelling manure into a rough wooden barrow which he would eventually take to the compost heap. Fiona was very quiet. Normally they would chat away as they tackled their daily jobs but today her mind was elsewhere.

'You're boring,' Finn mumbled as he sidled past with a pitchfork of manure.

'Shut up, Finn,' Fiona snapped.

'No, you shut up,' Finn fired back.

'I am shut up. I was shut up until you spoke.'

They both sat in silence for a moment.

'What are you thinking about?' Fiona sat on a milking stool with her back against the upright timber of Meg's stall.

'What do you think? I'm thinking about what Mum just told us.'

'I know,' said Finn. 'It's scary.'

Kirsty sat beside Fiona, laying her head on her lap.

'It's not just scary, Finn, it's terrifying. It could be the end of our world if they come here. They can't be allowed to get through the Yett. They have to be stopped.' Finn knelt beside Fiona and put his arm around the dog.

'Who could stop them? They are evil and dangerous. It would take a huge army to stop them.'

'An army would be no good. They have power enough to destroy a hundred armies.'

'Then we're done for.'

'There is one way they could be stopped. It is dangerous, but it is probably the only way.'

'How? What way?'

'We have to get the tail back before they can use it. We have to find that abandoned Yett.'

'Are you mad? Did you get kicked in the head by a donkey when I wasn't looking?'

'The problem is we don't know what the Yett looks like or how to get into Morbidea's realm.'

'Perhaps I can help you there,' a voice boomed from the shadows. Kirsty growled. Fiona jumped and Finn gave a yell.

A tall figure stepped from the shadows. His blue-hooded cloak hung down to his ankles and a sword was belted at his side. His riding boots of well-worn black leather matched the saddlebags which he carried across his strong shoulders. The children were startled but the stranger's appearance and manner did not seem threatening.

'Sit, Kirsty,' he commanded in a pleasant tone. The dog obeyed. He stepped forward into the light and pulled back his hood revealing a young, intelligent face. Laying his saddlebags over the top spar of the stall, he gave the children a smile and a kindness of character showed in his pale green eyes. Finn moved closer to Fiona.

'Who are you, sir?' Fiona asked.

'That all depends. For now, call me Malcolm. I have come to help you. Tonight is the night of the Samhain and time is running out. Finn, fetch me a bucket of water.'

Finn took his sister's hand and started to pull her toward the door of the barn.

'Right you are, sir. Come on, Fiona let's get the nice man a bucket of water.' Finn thought to himself, this man is as mad as a bag of snakes. Malcolm looked straight at him.

'Snakes are not mad, Finn, especially when they are in a bag. The darkness soothes them. It is when you open the bag that they can become unpredictable. Now get the water.' Finn's mouth fell wide open. He backed off towards the door of the barn not believing that this mysterious man could have had heard his thoughts. Fiona had heard them too.

'Who are you? How did you know what Finn was thinking and how was I able to hear what he thought?'

'Because I allowed you to,' he said.

Finn returned with the water. He had thought of going to get his mother but his instinct told him better. He put the bucket in front of Malcolm and stepped back beside Fiona.

'You did right not to get your mother,' said Malcolm picking up the bucket.

'How did you...?'

'No time for questions, Finn,' Malcolm interrupted him. 'There isn't a moment to lose.'

'Isn't there?' Finn asked.

'No! Not a moment. Six days to be precise. We need to borrow six days of time. Get me the candle from that lantern.'

There was only a stub of the thick candle left but Fiona took it out and handed it over. Malcolm held it between the fingers of his left hand and touched the wick with the index finger of his right. It burst into flame. The children looked at one another, Finn giving an incredulous smile. They turned once more towards Malcolm. He had cupped the candle in both hands and appeared to be moulding it into the shape of a ball. When he had finished, the wax was completely spherical, light emanating from it like a tiny moon. The children were transfixed. Malcolm extended his arm holding it aloft. He blew gently on the glowing orb withdrawing his hand, leaving the tiny moon hovering in the air.

'Wow!' Finn exclaimed.

Fiona circled the glowing orb looking at it intensely. She looked over at Malcolm, questions in her eyes.

'All in goodish time.' Picking up the bucket he launched the contents into the air and to their surprise the water floated and formed into a perfect liquid sphere. It hovered, the light from the tiny moon reflecting on the surface of the water.

'It's beautiful. What is it?' asked Fiona.

'It's magic for sure,' said Finn.

Malcolm took a small pouch from the saddlebags and poured a tiny mound of earth into the palm of his hand.

'It's not quite finished yet.' In response to a flick of his hand the watery sphere began to revolve anticlockwise. Malcolm threw the earth and as it touched the sphere it was absorbed into the swirling water creating five recognisable continents. 'You asked what it was. It is your planet Earth and the Moon.'

The children looked in awe as the world turned and the Moon shone onto its surface. Finn stepped closer to it.

'It's just like the globe the teacher's got on his desk, only this one is real.' Fiona too had a closer look. It was indeed real.

'What are you going to do with it?' she asked.

Malcolm was searching through his saddlebags once more.

'I am going to give you some borrowed time.'

He pulled out a small, brown leather book with gilt-edged pages. During this wizardry Fiona noticed that Meg was equally engrossed in the stranger and his creations. Malcolm opened the well-thumbed book. Holding it in his left hand he held out his right towards the levitating Moon and Earth. He began reading aloud in a strong resonant voice. To their amazement, the rotating Earth began to slow until it came to a clear stop.

'Turn about and against thy grain

Turn once, turn twice and turn again.'

At this command the Earth began to revolve against its natural direction, followed closely by the Moon. Malcolm continued.

'For six long days

In seven ways

We'll widdershin the tides and waves

Solar shadows go and come

An' the Moon shall rise before the Sun

The Moon will rise an' the Sun will set

An' borrowed time is what we'll get

So think us hard on what we say

For it will surely come our way

Bringing in night before the day.'

By now the planet was rotating clockwise. The shadows in the barn halted, creeping slowly into reverse. With increased speed the barn darkened as the morning receded. The sun set in the east and night came upon them. The storm resumed and soon reached its climax before reversing its rage and becoming subdued by the approach of the previous morning.

The children saw flashing images of themselves and Kirsty going about their work. Eventually the snows departed as the Earth revolved in reverse. Three days passed, four, five. On the sixth revolution just as the sun was about to set, Malcolm bellowed.

'Return to your axis of former days

Travail in unnatural toil no more

For the time you have lent will cleanse you deep

Or feed the worm at the very core.'

The Earth and Moon imploded into invisibility and the barn fell silent. In the distance, the peel of a church bell could be heard.

'What's happened?' Finn's voice was shaky.

'He's turned back time,' Fiona replied. 'I think to last Sunday.' Fiona looked to Malcolm for confirmation. He was nowhere to be seen.

'He's gone, Fiona, he's just vanished. What has he done?'

A TOUCH OF MAGIC

'If you don't know by now, boy, then you haven't the brains you were born with,' called a voice from behind. With a sharp intake of breath the children spun round.

Looming over the children was a distinguished but fearsome looking man. He wore a long mercury-grey coat. Silver embroidered edging traced its wide lapels and a blue-grey sash pulled the coat tight over a black tunic. Long white hair framed sharp angular features and flowed down across strong broad shoulders. His white neatly-trimmed beard highlighted a stern mouth and he held a long-carved staff in his ringed hand. He scowled at them with deep green eyes. He was a man who had little time for mortals.

'And what should we call you?' asked Fiona, fixing him with a stare. The man looked at her sternly, assessing her spirit.

'You have a boldness girl, just like your fool of a father. And it will be your undoing if you do not possess the cleverness to go with it.'

Fiona's anger rose within her. She still missed her father very much. 'I'll thank you to keep your remarks about my father to yourself,' she replied tersely, struggling to control herself.

'Yes!' Finn added. 'It's got nothing to do with you.'

'Silence!' he roared. 'It has everything to do with me.'

Taking a deep breath, he blew towards Finn whose body was flung backwards and landed at the foot of a hay bale. When Finn stood up and looked down, he was shocked to see he now had four black paws. He tried to shout, but an angry 'miaow' came from his mouth. Kirsty, who hated cats, made a growling lunge towards him and a frantic chase ensued. Finn scrambled high up onto a stack of hay bales to get out of Kirsty's reach. He stood there with his back arched, his fur standing on end, hissing and spitting at the enraged dog.

'Let that be a lesson to you, boy. Think before you speak.' With a

flick of his fingers the cat disappeared and Finn stood on two wobbly legs once more. It was hard to say who was more confused, Finn or the dog.

Fiona, still controlling her anger, looked at the stranger coldly. 'Is that the sort of cleverness you think I should possess?'

'Don't meddle with me, girl. You have no idea what you are dealing with here.'

'Maybe not, but I think I know exactly who I am dealing with, Master Widdershin.'

The stranger smiled for the first time. 'Clever girl, so you know who I am?'

Fiona helped Finn down from the hay bale. 'There's only one person I've heard of that takes pleasure transforming mortals into other creatures. Leachim Widdershin.'

'The wizard,' Finn gasped. 'What do you want with us? Just you go away. We don't want you here. Nobody wants you here.' A knot rose in Finn's stomach.

'Finn's right, we know all about you. You are not welcome here.'

The two children stood holding onto each other. Leachim laughed and walked forward until he was towering over them.

'You know nothing about me and although I may not be welcome, you are lucky that I am here. This quest you are determined to undertake will be doomed without my help. Even with it there is no guarantee that you will succeed.'

'So Malcolm is not the only one who can read our thoughts?' queried Fiona.

'What Malcolm sees I also see. We are one and the same.' Leachim crossed to an old barrel and seated himself, his hands folded around the rough staff and his elbows resting on his knees.

'If Malcolm and you are one and the same, why is it he seems pleasant while you prefer to be obnoxious?'

Leachim chuckled. 'I can see the parish school has not been wasted on you, girl. That is good, as you will need all of your wits about you. Malcolm is my opposing persona that I occasionally

inhabit. As you say, he is rather an agreeable character. Now pay attention, both of you. There is much that you must learn.'

Fiona sat on an upturned box. She'd heard many things about this wizard. Leachim Widdershin was a renowned, well-respected, but rather unusual wizard. It was said he shunned the company of people, living alone in his castle with only spirits for servants. He was known for his disdain of mortals and it was said he often practised his magic on them for mischief and fun. Fiona did not fully trust him and what he had done to Finn was proof of his impatience. Finn picked up the wooden bucket, turned it upside down and sat beside his sister. He had no idea what was going on. He was only vaguely aware of the possibility of a journey that he did not want to go on, so he decided to leave the talking to Fiona.

'The story your mother told you is not exaggerated in any way,' Leachim began. 'Our main problem is that the timescale of events has moved on. Morbidea's armies are mobilising and the assault on this world is planned to begin in six days, on the night of the Samhain. What I need to ask you, Fiona, is what made you decide to take on this quest to retrieve the tail?'

'I suppose,' answered Fiona without hesitation, 'that I feel we are responsible. Our father's curiosity caused this to happen. I feel we have no choice. We should be the ones to try and fix it.'

Finn couldn't keep quiet any longer. 'What can we do? We're only children. We'll never be able to get it back.'

'Why are you doing this?' Fiona asked Leachim. 'Everybody knows you are no great lover of our world, so why would you want to help us?'

The wizard nodded. 'What you don't know is that the tail can only be retrieved by one of the same blood. Someone related to your father. There is only you and your brother that stand between Morbidea's armies and the invasion of your world.' Leachim laid his staff across his legs and pushed his shoulders back stretching his spine. Leaning forward he popped his pipe into his mouth. 'What you have heard of me are tales of fear and superstition. I have

deliberately avoided the world and chosen a solitary and secluded life in which to study sorcery and the black arts.'

'Turning people into cats?' Finn said accusingly.

'That is nothing more than the easiest of tricks,' Leachim puffed his pipe, the smoke momentarily forming the shape of a cat before dissipating, 'a novelty I could teach you in five minutes. What I speak of is acquiring an understanding of the darkest secrets of the universe. To learn, comprehend and practise these secrets I must commune with forces that are not from this world.' His emerald eyes looked haunted. 'You see, you must know your enemy. In order to do battle you must take into your armoury all the weapons they possess and you must be prepared to use those weapons no matter the outcome.'

Leachim fell silent bowing his head, ancient memories causing his heart to ache. Fiona softened to him for the first time.

'Why can't you use those things you have learned to stop Morbidea and her forces?'

'These gifts,' he mocked, 'are not learned or mastered easily. They are acquired over millennia. Morbidea and her cohorts have been schooled and instructed by generations of the most accomplished masters. Despite being at a disadvantage, I will in time possess enough knowledge to oppose her. However, time is against us. If the Yett is opened from the other side, the powers I now possess will be of little use in stopping her. The Yett must be closed against them as it was intended to be. That can only be achieved with the return of the tail.'

'Have you ever passed through the Yett?' Fiona enquired.

'Indeed yes, the Yett has been my portal to their realm for many years. I have visited to spy upon them and acquire the secrets that will help defend this world against their aggression.'

'So you are part mortal yourself?'

Leachim was impressed that Fiona was clever enough to work out his secret. 'You are very bright. My mother was mortal. Her traits and frailties, although revered in your world, are a hindrance to me

in my chosen path. I have, therefore, undertaken to eradicate them from my personality.'

'So Malcolm is your human persona?'

'Let's hope you will be as sharp when dealing with the trials ahead of you. That is, if you are resolved to go on this quest?'

'Yes, I am, and if you are going to help that can only be a good thing.'

Leachim nodded intently, 'I'm afraid you might find my help somewhat limited, but I will endeavour to do my best.'

Finn who had been silently toying with a stick blurted out, 'Just a minute! What about me? I don't want to go. Everything I've seen and heard is really scary. I'm only ten and Fiona's only fourteen. How could we ever fight all these bad things? If we go we'll never come back, we'll never see our mother again. Is that what you want Fiona?' He turned to Leachim. 'You're a wizard. Why can't you do it? You've got all the magic stuff. Why don't you go and turn them all into cats?'

'I'm sorry, Finn,' frowned Fiona. 'I'd made up my own mind without asking you. You don't have to come. I'll go alone and you stay here and help Mum with the farm.'

Leachim turned to Finn. 'You have every right to be afraid, Finn. No one will blame you if you do not go. It only needs one of you. As long as one of the blood undertakes this quest that is all that can be asked.'

Finn and Fiona looked at one another.

'I'm not letting her go on her own,' said Finn, throwing the stick at Fiona. 'She'll just get into trouble on her own.'

Fiona smiled and threw the stick back.

Kirsty leapt from nowhere and caught it in mid-air, halfway between them. She dropped it at Leachim's feet, backing off and waiting for him to throw it for her. Leachim threw the stick several feet into the air where it hovered teasingly. Bemused, Kirsty sat staring up at it, waiting for it to drop.

'That should keep her busy for a while,' observed Leachim. They

laughed and for a moment the tension of the situation eased. 'Now, let me propose a plan of action. I will guide you, Kirsty and the rest of your group to the Yett and transport you safely through the portal.'

'The rest of our group,' interjected Fiona. 'What do you mean, the rest?'

From behind them, a woman's voice spoke gently through soft lips. 'He means me.'

The children swung round but there was no one there, only Meg standing in her stall.

'Me,' said Meg. 'He means me bairns, Meg.'

Finn shrieked and jumped up from his bucket. 'Meg!' he screamed, climbing the bars of the stall and jumping on the mare's back. He threw his arms round her neck. 'I always dreamt you could speak.'

'I know,' said Meg. 'I always did speak to you in your dreams. But thanks to Master Widdershin and the quest we must undertake, we shall be able to talk every day.'

Finn sat up on Meg's back and looked toward the wizard. 'Thank you, Leachim.'

Fiona went to Meg and laid her face against her long grey nose stroking her gently. 'Any more surprises?' she asked the wizard.

'Only me,' said Mouldy as he swooped from the rafters to alight on the spar.

'A talking houlet as well. This is going to be great fun,' Finn said delightedly. He had spent his life talking to animals but until now they had never spoken back to him except in his imagination and dreams of course.

'Let me introduce Mouldy,' continued Leachim. 'He can fly silently day and night. Mouldy will be our eye in the sky and will be a great advantage to us. Goodness knows we will need it.' Finn turned excitedly to Leachim. 'All you need to do now is cast a spell to make Kirsty talk.'

'Kirsty is a creature of action and a quick thinker. Have a listen and see what I mean.' He elevated his hand towards Kirsty who was

still fixated on the levitating stick and she instantly gave voice to her thoughts.

'What's up with this stick? Why is it not falling? It should be falling.'

Leachim twitched his fingers and the stick dropped into a perfectly timed snapping mouth. Kirsty shook it and let it drop.

'Great catch, well done, first time too, who wants a turn to throw the stick? Wait a minute we're going somewhere, come on get together, bunch up you lot, where are we going? Get in with the group, what's that bird doing here? Come on we've got things to do, let's go, let's go everybody, keep together, that direction, no, not that one, this one, if I have to come round there, oh for goodness sake, keep together. Am I talking to myself, am I...?'

Leachim raised his hand again and the dog fell silent.

'We wouldn't get a word in edgeways!' exclaimed Finn.

'I had no idea Kirsty had so much going through her mind,' laughed Fiona. 'Once we get through the portal, how will we even begin to find the tail?'

'We have one lead. Over the years the tail has been in their realm it has become a powerful symbol. We know it is kept in an ancient convent where it is guarded by a sect known as the Cadaveran Nuns.'

Finn interrupted abruptly, 'So all we have to do is steal the tail back from a bunch of old nuns?'

'Not quite, a Cadaveran is a creature resurrected from the dead bodies of women who were hanged in our world for murder. They have become undead warriors, led by their commander, Stinkeye Cadabra. They are fanatically loyal to Morbidea and for the last fourteen years have guarded and worshipped the tail. It has become a symbol fit for a sorceress queen and is soon to be delivered into Morbidea's hands. Stinkeye is the keeper of the tail.'

He pointed his staff towards the centre of the barn where a glowing image appeared. They saw Meg's tail set into a silver-tooled handle. The handle was at least twelve inches long, engraved and embossed with the most beautiful Celtic designs. Emanating from

the top and billowing like sea urchins in a gentle tide were the grey strands of Meg's tail.

'This,' announced Leachim, 'is the object of your quest. This is what we must seek and find in order to save your world.'

There was silence in the barn. All eyes were on the tail and all thoughts on the enormity of the task ahead.

Chapter 5

THE GREY MARE'S TAIL

After gathering essential provisions for the journey the unlikely army was set to march off. Leachim informed them it would take many hours to reach Loch Skeen, near which the Yett was hidden. He would meet them there. In the meantime he had other things which required his attention.

Finn demanded that he be in charge of Meg which everyone was happy to agree to. He could hardly get into any bother leading Meg by the halter. Also being younger, if he got tired he could ride on her back. Two large sacks were hung over Meg's broad shoulders which contained bread, cheese, a large ham and a goodly supply of apples and potatoes. They also had oatmeal and a supply of ready-made bannocks. This food might have to last them some time as no one knew if they would be able to find any kind of sustenance once they travelled through the portal. Mouldy joked that if they had mice or similar rodents beyond the Yett then he would never starve.

At last the time came to depart.

'Fiona! We should say goodbye to Mum.' Leachim stepped forward putting a hand on Finn's shoulder.

'There is no need,' he said gently. 'Besides, your mother would

not let you go. She knows the dangers you would face.'

'But she'll miss us,' Finn pleaded.

'No, she won't. For although you are going on this quest, you will also be here. Time in this world has been abandoned. As long as you return within six days, no one will know you have been away. They will only know of your journey if you choose to tell them. If you fail in your quest, it will be of no consequence for the Earth will be doomed to a darkness from which it will never recover. Now, we can delay no longer. We must be gone.'

Leachim pushed open the door of the barn. Kirsty was the first to dash through. Fiona came next, then Finn leading Meg by the halter. Leachim watched them leave, Mouldy sitting on his right shoulder.

'Look after them, my friend,' he said to the wise old bird. 'They will need all the help you can give them.' He put his hand up for Mouldy to step onto and held the bird aloft to assist in its take-off.

The previous Sunday, this very day they set out on their adventure, had been rather pleasant. It was mild and sunny for a late October day. Anyone observing the little group as they made their way through the fields and meadows would never have thought that they were in fact embarking on a dangerous quest. Kirsty shot ahead of the group, running here and there covering at least four or five times the distance the others were travelling. Finn skipped ahead sometimes throwing a stick or climbing an interesting bit of tree. Fiona was deep in thought. She was enjoying the sunshine and the smell of the flora. She marvelled at how beautiful the countryside was. Fiona listened to Meg clopping behind her and everything seemed to be right and in place. This was how the world should be: a boy playing, a dog running and nature making the sounds and smells of life. Her heart, however, was heavy. She knew that the very existence of these things depended on her, an ordinary teenage girl.

Mouldy had decided to conserve his energy and not fly too much until they were through the Yett. He sat comfortably on Meg's head which was the best place for them to have a conversation.

'Don't sink those claws in too sharply,' said Meg, her soft nostrils slightly flaring.

'I won't. As long as you don't make any sudden movements,' growled the owl.

They plodded on at a pleasant rhythmic pace, passing a village where the inhabitants now stood motionless reminding them that time as they knew it had been abandoned. This excited Finn.

'Fiona, because we've borrowed time from the past none of the villagers can see us, don't you think that's amazing?'

Fiona smiled. Finn had such a love of the world and the wonders of it. She knew that if they got through this, his experiences would make him a very special person.

'Look!' Finn was pointing to a plump, well-fed lad who was bent over a shilpit skelf of a boy, his fist clenched ready to punch him. 'That's Harry Beltcher. He's a real bully. Remember that day he called me freckle-face and pushed me into the duck pond?'

Finn ran over to Harry and looked straight into his paralysed twisted face. 'Hello, Harry, still picking on people? Think it's time to teach you a lesson.' Kneeling down Finn undid Harry's bootlaces and tied them tightly together. Turning over a boulder he found a fat worm and popped it into Harry's gaping mouth.

'Finn,' screeched Fiona, half shocked and half laughing. 'You can't do that.'

'I'm not finished yet,' giggled Finn. At that he took a run up to Harry and gave him a huge kick up the backside. Turning to Fiona he said, 'I wish I could be here to see what happens when time comes back.' They both laughed until tears ran down their faces.

Several hours later, without having stopped for a break, the group of adventurers passed through the small village of Moffatt and came to the edge of a wood at the mouth of a wide glen.

'We've made good time,' said Meg. 'We should stop here and rest a while.'

'A wise idea,' said the owl. 'Rest and eat. I will circle the area to ensure all is well.'

Mouldy took off silently, climbing swiftly into the sky. All the companions were glad of a break. Even Kirsty was happy to rest. Finn gave her some scraps of ham while the children ate bannocks and drank from a flask of milk. Meg munched on some chopped apples. Fiona had a horrible premonition that they were all experiencing their last moment of normality.

After their meal, feeling tired, they lay down to rest.

'How long will it take to get to Loch Skeen?' asked Finn as he stretched his sleepy bones.

'It shouldn't be too long,' yawned Fiona, 'maybe two more hours. Leachim said we should travel up through the glen until we find the path to the loch. I don't know how easy it will be to find it.'

'It should be easy enough,' said Finn. 'It's beside a large waterfall which should be easy to spot.'

'How do you know that?' Fiona raised herself onto one elbow and looked quizzically at Finn.

'Old Crusty Campbell, the teacher, told us about it in our geography lessons. He was born near Loch Skeen and he was always going on about it.' Finn stood up, picked up a stick from the ground and began an impression of Crusty Campbell. He pointed the stick at Fiona, rounded his shoulders and spoke in a crotchety squeaky voice. 'Sit up straight, you grubby little creatures, and pay attention.' Fiona laughed. Finn's impersonation was very good. 'Loch Skeen is the very beautiful place where I was born four hundred years ago, much nicer than the dung-heap you little stinkies live in. The water from the loch runs down the hanging valley where it forms one of the highest waterfalls in the land known as the Grey Mare's Tail. . . You, boy! Pay attention you little tyke. As I was saying. . . ' Fiona didn't hear any more. She felt as though she had been hit by a thunderbolt. She pushed onto her knees and stood up, swaying from the shock of what she'd heard.

'What did you just say?'

'Pay attention you little tyke.'

'No, not that bit. What did you say the waterfall was called?'

'The Grey Mare's Tail,' replied Finn, his impersonation forgotten as he realised Fiona was onto something.

'You are a genius, Finn.' Fiona grabbed her shawl and hastily wrapped it around herself. Finn was taken aback as Fiona usually retorted by calling him a daft wee gowk.

At this point, Mouldy glided silently back into camp, landing on the stump of a tree.

'All clear,' he said. 'Leachim wants us to meet him further up the glen before sunset.'

'Come on,' shouted Fiona, 'let's get going.' She took the lead toward the main path up through the glen. Kirsty caught up and was soon well ahead of her. 'Come on, Finn, hurry up.' Finn ran towards Meg, springing off a log and onto her back.

'Come on, Meg, let's go.' Meg took off at speed. With Finn comfortably balanced they galloped together, the best of friends.

Mouldy found himself all alone sitting on his tree stump. Don't mind me, he thought. I'll just make my own way there. He sighed. Too much haste, he thought, as he surveyed the deserted rest area and all the provisions that had been left behind.

Chapter 6

AMBUSH AT LOCH SKEEN

It was early evening when they reached the burn leading to the Grey Mare's Tail and although it was still quite warm, cloud was forming and a light mist was beginning to roll down the hills.

The waterfall was visible from the floor of the glen and did indeed look like the long tail of a horse. It came from the top of the cliff in a narrow but incredibly powerful gush, rushing over the rocks and