The Storm Keepers' Battle

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Ten days have passed since Fionn faced Morrigan on the shores of Arranmore and said goodbye to his grandfather for good. Now Morrigan's brothers stalk the land in search of new souls, whilst the Merrows struggle to keep the growing forces of Black Point Rock at bay.

Chapter One

THE FLYING HORSE

Fionn Boyle was sure of two things:

One, he was full of an ancient, rippling magic that could explode from him at any moment.

Two, he had absolutely no idea how to control it.

Not for the first time, he had come to Cowan's Lake, hoping for a miracle. And right now, he was kneeling over its frosty waters while ravens glided overhead, cackling maniacally.

'I think they're laughing at me.'

'Attention-seekers,' muttered Shelby, who was glaring menacingly at the sky. 'They're only trying to put you off.'

Fionn flexed his fingers and tried to summon a flicker of magic. Beneath the skein of ice, a single rainbow fish

swished its coloured fin in greeting. There were no visions of past Storm Keepers to greet him today, just his own scowling reflection.

'Told you the lake was a bad idea,' said Sam, who was reclining against a nearby boulder. 'Not worth the frostbite, if you ask me.'

'Cowan's Lake is full of magic. It might help.' Shelby crouched down beside Fionn. 'You just need to calm your mind. Think of something nice. Like puppies.' The shell around her neck glinted bone-white on the icy water. 'Or otters holding hands while they sleep. Or a bunny rabbit on a skateboard. Oh! Or an alpaca. Or –'

'An island made entirely of pizza,' said Sam dreamily. 'Where all the trees are pepperoni.'

Shelby rolled her eyes. 'Sa-aaam! Fionn *has* to find a way to make his magic work.'

Fionn sighed. He had rattled through a million different thoughts already; ones that made him happy, ones that made him sad, ones that made him laugh and others that made him want to tear his hair out. He was still trying to find the right emotion – the key that would unlock his magic again. Just like it had in Hughie Rua's Cove.

He stuck his hands in his pockets, his fingers brushing against Dagda's emerald. He had taken to carrying it everywhere with him now, hoping it might bring him some

sort of luck. Today, it was glowing faintly. 'Maybe one of you needs to be in mortal danger for my magic to wake up again.'

Sam glanced at Shelby. 'How do you feel about dangling upside down over a cliff?'

She cut her eyes at him. 'How do you feel about going swimming with the Merrows?'

'I'd rather eat my own shoelaces, thanks.'

'They wouldn't *really* hurt you,' she teased. 'They answer to me, remember?'

'H*ow* could I forget?' Sam returned drily. 'You have that *giant* shell hanging from your neck at all times which, quite frankly, is a crime against fashion.'

Fionn watched the lone rainbow fish sink to the bottom of the lake, and felt the same sinking feeling inside himself. It had been ten days since his grandfather had disappeared under the Northern Lights, never to return. Ten days since Morrigan had been resurrected from her tomb beneath the Sea Cave, and almost devoured Fionn's soul. Now they were trapped on the island, with little hope of rescue, expecting her to strike at any moment.

Winter haunted the island like a ghost. Christmas had come and gone with little ceremony, the new year slipping quietly through their fingers. On Fionn's grandfather's parting advice, the entire island had come together to try

raise their own sorcerer – someone strong enough to destroy Morrigan – but so far the search for Dagda's grave site had turned up nothing.

Not to mention, they couldn't find Rose anywhere – the peculiar old woman who, according to Malachy Boyle, was the only person on the island who could help. No one had any idea where she lived, and she hadn't been down to the strand in over a week. She was proving to be just as elusive as Fionn's magic.

'… I am *not* jealous,' Sam was saying unconvincingly. 'I like my fish battered and with chips, thanks.'

'They are not *fish*. Stop making jokes about eating them!'

'What's Lír going to do? Come up through my plughole when I'm having a bath?'

Shelby folded her arms. 'Lír's the only thing keeping us all safe right now. I doubt she's got time to traumatise herself like that.'

Fionn was just about to turn from the lake when something white drifted across the surface, snagging his attention.

'*Guys!*' he gasped.

The reflection had *wings*. Their span was so wide, the shape looked like an aeroplane at first. But it was flying much too low, and the wings were *moving*. Then there

were the legs – four of them. And a mane too.

'It's Aonbharr!' shouted Shelby, right into Fionn's ear. She leapt into the air, as if she had caught fire. 'He's here! He's come to save us! I knew he'd come! I *knew* it!'

As if sprung from an impossible dream, Dagda's winged horse was soaring high above them. His coat was the silver white of a star at full brightness, his tail sparkling in the winter sun. He glided across the sky, his mighty wings disturbing greying gusts of cloud, so they could glimpse the blue behind them.

A*onbharr – for danger that cannot be outrun.*

Fionn's magic erupted without warning, sending a familiar heat gushing through his bloodstream.

T*here you are.*

The wind rose in a fierce gust. The ice in the lake shattered in a rippling *crrraaack*, the surface exploding into a riot of colour as the rainbow trout swam up to have a look.

Fionn hopped up on to the boulder and waved his arms above his head. 'Down here, Aonbharr!'

Sam and Shelby were jumping up and down, shouting at the top of their lungs.

The winged horse appeared not to hear their pleas. He climbed higher and higher, his mighty wings slashing through the churning clouds.

'He's leaving!' cried Sam.

Fionn leapt off the boulder. 'He's flying north. Let's follow him!'

They took off in a hurry, Fionn's magic gusting a trail through the grass as they bolted towards the forest. He flung his hand out and the trees bent backwards, their branches creaking as they twisted out of the way. Soon, all three of them were out the other side, panting but not stopping. They vaulted over a trickling stream and charged headlong through Tom Rowan's farm. Sheep bleated as they scattered, the wind nipping at their hooves. Fionn's magic snapped the fence in two and flung boulders out of the way as Fionn and his friends set a course for the silver-backed hills.

By the time they crested them, they were gasping for breath.

Aonbharr was getting further and further away. He was like a comet streaking through the clouds.

Fionn's exhilaration was fading. Frustration was rising in its place, and a slow-creeping fear chilled his bloodstream. The wind was dying. His magic was weakening.

'T*here!* He's just passed over the cliffs!' heaved Shelby. 'Come on, guys. We're so *close*.'

They pelted down the hill at double-time, the northern plains of Arranmore unfurling before them in a patchwork of frosty grass.

Soon, Shelby's strides slowed, and Sam ran out of breath entirely. Fionn had a terrible stitch in his side. His blood was still warm – but the heat had changed. It was less the raging waterfall of ancient power, and more like the full-body burn of muscles that were not used to running.

Up ahead, the lighthouse was white and gleaming as it jutted from the earth. Just beyond it, a wedge of land called Eagle's Point curled into the sea like a crooked finger. Fionn and his friends climbed over its knuckle. Where only a little while ago flowers grew in long-stemmed meadows and white-tailed eagles came to nest, the earth was cracked and barren. It was like passing through a graveyard now, the only sound the icy whistle of an unforgiving wind.

Finally they stopped.

Sam scowled at the clouds. 'I trekked through all those mucky fields in my *good* shoes and risked an asthma attack for that horse and he just *flies away*!'

Shelby's shoulders slumped. 'I've been waiting my whole life to see him.'

'Maybe he didn't see us,' said Fionn, drifting towards the cliff-edge. 'Or maybe he was scared.'

From here, Fionn could see the smoking ruin that was once Black Point Rock. Over the past week and a half,

the broken shards of the three sea stacks had bent towards each other, forming a volcano of shining black rock. It had become Morrigan's lair. Ravens circled the sky above it, their beady eyes trained on the island.

'The Black Mountain's growing,' said Fionn uneasily.

'And the sky above it is getting darker.' Shelby tugged him away. 'Come on. We shouldn't be here.'

'It belches too, you know. Sometimes at night, I can hear it hacking up stuff.' Sam pulled a face. 'Probably all that ash and smoke.'

They backed away from the cliff-edge. Fionn had the sudden, sickening sensation that Morrigan was watching them.

'I mean, *of course* an ancient undead sorceress would have *no* regard for the dangers of air pollution,' Sam went on.

Fionn wrapped his arms around himself. Out here, the sea air was colder, and without his magic to warm him, the chill was rattling through his bones. 'We should head back and tell the others about Aonbharr. It might mean something.'

'Of *course* it means something.' Shelby's braces glinted as she linked arms with them. 'It's a sign of *hope*.'

Her words were met with an emphatic snort.

'Aonbharr's return isn't a sign of hope,' came a croaky

voice from behind them. 'It's a sign of doom. Or don't you know your own island history?'

A hooded figure stood in the doorway to the lighthouse. It cocked its head, the lines of its face hidden in the folds of its shawl. But Fionn recognised the voice well enough. It was Rose. The woman who had helped his grandfather during the years he couldn't leave the cottage. The same woman he had been told to find.

'*And the fourth gift, born of red skies and raging wind, was Dagda's own beloved Aonbharr, a horse of flight,*' she went on, as though she was reciting the words from an ancient text. '*For danger that cannot be outrun.*'

Shelby swallowed. 'I forgot about that part.'

'So, it's doom, then. Cool. Cool, cool.' Sam shifted from one foot to the other. 'How many of our four hundred or so islanders do you reckon will fit on his back?'

'The only one he deems worthy,' said the old woman flatly.

Fionn drifted towards her. 'Rose? We've been looking for you for over a week. What are you doing all the way up here?'

By way of answer, the old woman shuffled to one side. The door to the lighthouse swung open behind her. 'This is my home,' she said, as though it was the most

obvious thing in the world. 'I think perhaps you three should come in.'

Fionn, Shelby and Sam exchanged a glance. And without saying a word, they stalked arm in arm into the lighthouse. The door slammed shut behind them, sealing them in.

Chapter Two

THE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER

'Well, this is … rustic.' Sam's voice echoed around them as they took in the mismatched furniture and the exposed brick. 'I mean it's very …' He trailed off.

'Bleak.' Rose bolted the door. Twice. 'I'm aware.'

Fionn eyed the heavy lock-chain as she slid it into place. 'Are we safe in here?'

Rose's laugh was sudden and brash, like the call of a wild bird. 'We're not safe anywhere any more.' She shooed them into the middle of the room. 'But you may as well make yourselves at home. I'll put the kettle on.'

As Fionn's eyes adjusted to the dimness, he saw that the bottom floor of the lighthouse was like a museum and a library rolled into one. There were cases full of leather-bound

books, and crooked shelves stacked to the brim with old newspapers. Most of the cement floor was covered by a sprawling, threadbare rug and the peeling walls were strung with fraying tapestries. A collection of Aran shawls hung on a coat-rack by the door, and beside them, old stone pots and bronze vases lay cluttered in a pile.

In the middle of it all was a kitchen – a stove and basin, wedged between two lopsided cupboards and a small wooden table marred by coffee stains. A tattered green armchair sat alone by a fireplace whose chimney seemed to lead to nowhere. But the room was strangely warm and there was fresh ash in the grate. The hairs on the back of his neck rose. There was magic in here. He could sense it drifting around them, like dust particles. He could taste it faintly on his tongue, sharp and zingy as a lemon.

Fionn scanned the clutter, looking for the source of it.

Rose was rummaging in a drawer. 'Milk and sugar?'

'Uh, sure,' said Fionn.

'Two spoonfuls for me, please,' said Shelby, who was studying a dark green tapestry of a battle scene.

'I'll have four, thanks. I need a pick-me-up.' Sam was examining a spiral staircase that wound up and out of sight. He crouched down beside a battered antique chest that had been wedged underneath it. 'Hey, what's in here?' he asked, jiggling the padlock.

'Don't touch that!' Rose raised her teaspoon in warning. 'It's not time.'

Sam splayed his hands and backed away from it. 'I was just *asking*.'

Fionn, who hadn't even noticed the strange-looking chest, realised it was exactly what he'd been searching for. He could sense the magic coming from it. 'Not time for what?'

Rose ignored him and busied herself with the tea.

'Right. Take a mug and follow me.' She disappeared up the spiral staircase, the floorboards creaking as the children scurried after her. The top floor of the lighthouse was much narrower than the bottom, the ceiling high and domed. Winter's glare poured in through windows that curved all the way around, showcasing both the Atlantic Ocean and the barren northern shelf of the island.

The air up here still tasted of magic, but all Fionn could see was a narrow bed and a chest of drawers. They were arranged around the focal point of the room, which was a mammoth lighthouse lens. It was a giant glass orb, rimmed in brass, and was certainly big enough to fit an entire human. Sam ducked under the brass casing and stuck his head inside. 'Hey, there's only one tiny lightbulb in here!' His voice sounded both faraway and distorted. 'Is that where the big massive beam comes from?'

'Yeah, it's called science,' said Shelby, making a face at him through the glass.

'Booooring. Who needs science when you have magic?'

'Well, we don't really have magic,' said Fionn awkwardly.

'Thanks for the reminder, Professor Doom.' Sam spilled some of his tea as he clambered back out. 'And I was just starting to relax.'

Rose was by the window now, looking out over the cliffs.

They joined her at the ledge. From up here, Fionn could see all the way across the Atlantic Ocean, to where the blue-grey water turned murky and dark at the horizon. Below them, Black Point Rock speared from the sea like an arrowhead.

'It looks even bigger from up here,' said Shelby uneasily.

Rose hmm'd. 'It's growing.'

'And the tide …' Fionn touched his forehead against the glass. There was barely a ribbon of sea between them and Morrigan's lair now. 'It's almost gone.'

'She's been draining it to get around the Merrows,' said Rose. 'The more her power grows, the closer she gets to our shores.'

Shelby paled. 'So Aonbharr really is a warning.'

'The least he could do is come down and say hello,' grumbled Sam.

'Yeah,' said Shelby. 'Say it to our faces.'

'Probably thinks he's too good for us.'

Fionn sighed. 'Guys, he's a *horse*.'

Rose snorted. 'Aonbharr has no sense of superiority. He began as an ordinary horse in an ordinary field. He only became a marvel years later. Much like our Storm Keeper here.'

Fionn frowned. 'Are you making fun of me?'

Rose went on, without answering. 'Aonbharr was Dagda's horse when he was a little boy. A proud white stallion with a quicksilver mane and a fiercely loyal temperament. They went everywhere together.'

Sam slurped his tea thoughtfully. 'Where'd he get those giant wings, then?'

Beneath the folds of her shawl, Rose's green eyes came to rest on Fionn.

'After both sorcerers collapsed during the battle for Arranmore, Morrigan's ravens carried her body to safety.' Her gaze darkened, the shadow of a secret moving inside it. 'Then they returned for Dagda. Aonbharr was so loyal, he leapt through a thousand of those wretched birds to rescue his master.'

She looked away, clearing her throat.

'Somehow, the sky turned red with the last of Dagda's magic and, beneath its full moon, the horse sprouted wings and carried him away to his final resting place.'

Fionn blinked. 'I don't think I know that story.'

'How did Dagda give Aonbharr wings if he was unconscious?' said Sam. 'It sounds a bit impossible.'

'If it sounds impossible, then it's probably true,' said Shelby sagely. 'That's how things work here.'

They sipped their tea, three pairs of hopeful eyes watching the faraway clouds, as though the flying horse might reappear at the sound of his name. Fionn wondered what he would even do if Aonbharr swooped down to meet them. He would never desert his own islanders. And besides, what could one lone horse and boy do against the likes of Morrigan?

No. Fionn was not going to flee. He was going to stay, and fight.

He turned back to Rose. 'Before my grandfather died, he told me to look for you. He said you might be able to help us raise our own sorcerer.' He frowned. 'Until today, I couldn't find you anywhere. I haven't seen you at any of the island meetings.'

'And you haven't joined any of our search parties either,' said Sam, somewhat pointedly.

'That's because they're a waste of time.' Rose took a noisy sip of tea. 'Malachy only half knew what he was talking about. A powerful sorcerer might well defeat Morrigan, but if you think finding Dagda's grave is the answer to your problems, then you're wrong.'

The silence expanded, Fionn and his friends exchanging worried glances as the lighthouse keeper deftly pricked a pin in their last hope.

When Rose spoke again, it was to Fionn. 'If you want my advice, you're better off finding your way to the Whispering Tree. It will have the answers you need.'

'I don't need answers,' said Fionn, with growing frustration. 'I need a sorcerer.'

'What you *need* is a battle plan that might actually work,' said Rose calmly. 'You can't just go around digging up old bogs and staring into frozen lakes hoping something will happen.'

'*T*old you that was a waste of time,' said Sam.

Shelby glared at him.

'You need a direction.' Rose took another sip, her eyes dancing over the rim of her mug. 'And I'm giving you one.'

'Can we have an easier one?' said Shelby politely. 'You know, since the Whispering Tree is a completely inaccessible all-knowing oak tree hidden in some impossible layer of Arranmore that none of us have ever seen before.'

'Well, I've seen it. With Bartley. Sort of,' Fionn reminded them, though he wasn't sure happening upon the Whispering Tree in someone else's memory really counted. 'But we had to burn a candle to get to it. And it was at the end of a really strange trail.'

Rose nodded. 'The Whispering Tree is the most magical place on Arranmore Island. If you seek its wisdom, you must first find a trail to take you to it.'

'I don't suppose we'd come across one of those on a nature walk?' said Shelby hopefully.

Rose released her brash laugh. 'You can go out looking for one all you like, but the trails decide when to appear. And to whom. They have a mind of their own.'

'Great,' said Fionn sarcastically. 'Just like everything else on Arranmore.'

Sam groaned. 'Why does our island have to be so *moody*?'

Rose gestured to the mountain in the sea. 'The island has grown wary. You can hardly blame it when that wretched hag is so near. Morrigan's followers might be empty, soulless vessels, but they wear human faces. The trails don't know who to trust any more.' She turned back to them. 'You'll need someone who's walked the trails before. Or, perhaps, something that once belonged to them.' Her gaze came to rest on Sam. 'There was a Storm Keeper who

lived not long before you three. Her name was Maggie Patton …'

Sam beamed. 'She was my great-grandmother!'

'You remind me of her. It's that mischievous smile. It's what's given me the idea, in fact.' Rose's eyes glittered as she took another sip. 'Maggie visited the Whispering Tree more times than any other Keeper before her. When she played her flute, the island woke up. The flowers bloomed. The birds sang. Her music had a magic all of its own. Every so often, she came up here, to Eagle's Point. When she offered her music up to those white-capped waves, the Eagle's Trail always revealed itself to her. It was like clockwork. Like somehow they were old friends.'

Sam leaned forward without meaning to, drawn by the magic in Rose's story.

'There was one song in particular that she played,' she went on, tap-tapping her fingers along the mug. '*The Eagle's Call*.'

Fionn's cheeks began to prickle. There was magic in the air again – the citrusy tang gathering on his tongue. It felt familiar. It felt like hope. He caught the yellowed glint of the old woman's smile as she offered it to Sam.

'When Maggie died, she left her flute to her daughter, Maeve, who in turn left it to –'

'Me! Maggie's great-grandson!' Sam burst out. 'It's me!

I have the magical flute! I *knew* I was the most important one! I KNEW IT!' He waved his arms in victory, sloshing his tea everywhere. 'FINALLY! It's my turn!'

'Really mature, Sam,' said Shelby.

Sam was too busy victory-moonwalking to hear her.

Rose chuckled. 'If you return to the northern cliffs and play *The Eagle's Call* on Maggie's flute, you *might* be able to rouse the trail before Morrigan's dark magic chokes the memory of it from our island for good.' She shrugged, then added, 'Or you might not. I'm afraid it's only a breadcrumb.'

Fionn set his tea down. 'One breadcrumb is better than none.'

Shelby bolted for the stairs. 'Come on, Sam, let's go and get your flute.'

'Wait.' Sam paused mid-moonwalk. His face fell.

'What's the matter?'

'I don't know that song – *The Eagle's Call*. I've never even heard it before.'

'Your dad might know it,' said Shelby quickly. 'Or Donal. There are, like, a bajillion Pattons living on the island. One of them must know the island's favourite song.'

Sam's face brightened, but whatever he was about to say was drowned out by a thundering belch. The lighthouse trembled, the floorboards rattling against their feet.

Out to sea, the Black Mountain was hacking up a thick plume of smoke. Ash exploded in a mushroom cloud before raining down on the sea.

Shelby clapped her sleeve over her mouth. 'Ugh. It smells like rotten eggs.'

'That's dark magic,' said Rose, watching the sky turn black. 'And it's getting stronger.'

Fionn hurried for the stairs, pulling Sam with him. 'Come on. We need to find that song before it's too late.'

A minute later, the lighthouse door swung open to a rush of cold air, the Atlantic wind howling as if to hurry them along.