WOLF CROWN

A MIDNIGHT TREASURE BOOK

PRAISE FOR *MIDNIGHT TREASURE*
A *Times*, *Daily Mail*, *iPaper, New Statesman* and *TLS* Book of the Year

'**Something completely new** – like *The Hobbit* with extra fur and fangs. **Enchanting.**' *The Times*

'This epic fantasy ticks every box – **fabulous.**' *Daily Mail*

'A **deliciously spooky** fantasy.' *iPaper*

'**A wholly absorbing adventure** by this stunningly talented author.' *New Statesman*

'**Fast-paced and full of lovely touches . . .** will give readers of ten and up heaps to enjoy.' *Literary Review*

'**A classy take on the vampire and werewolves genre** – a high-stakes parable of friendship . . . and *Indiana Jones* derring do.' *Observer*

'**A wonderful, imaginative book** – perfect for fans of *Northern Lights*.' BookTrust

'**A cast of brilliantly-imagined characters.**' *Irish Examiner*

'Stop the hunt for your next epic read because this is **a treasure of a fantasy book. High stakes, big heart, frightfully good.**'
A. F. Steadman, author of the *Skandar* series

'**Epic, glorious, enchanting and dangerous:** Piers Torday is a writer at the height of his powers in this rich tapestry of a story, with the tantalising prospect of so much more to come.' Emma Carroll

'Pure storytelling joy from the first fabulously thrilling page to the last. **One of my favourite children's books ever.**' Lauren St John

'A treasure chest of marvels and a wonderful, thrilling read, *Midnight Treasure* is overflowing with eerie adventure, unexpected heroes and truly bloodthirsty villains. **Breathless, bold and endlessly imaginative, it grips you in its claws from first page to last.**' Jonathan Stroud

'Lush, cinematic, deliciously dark and compelling – Torday has taken the vampire myths we know (and lots we don't) and turned them into a fully realised world of monsters and magic. **A thrilling treasure trove.**' Ross Montgomery

'**A brilliant fantasy adventure . . .** wrapped up in Piers Torday's characteristically lovely prose.' Anthony McGowan

'**A triumph of storytelling.** Piers Torday creates an unforgettable and mesmerizing world. **This is a story with a wild and fierce courage at its heart.**' Polly Ho-Yen

'A **breathtakingly imagined** world full of marvels, myths and magic.' *Lancashire Evening Post*



Also by Piers Torday

The Last Wild
The Dark Wild
The Wild Beyond
There May Be a Castle
The Lost Magician
The Frozen Sea
The Wild Before
Midnight Treasure
Tree Thing

With Paul Torday
The Death of an Owl

Plays
The Box of Delights
Christmas Carol – a fairytale

WOLF CROWN

A MIDNIGHT TREASURE BOOK



PIERS TORDAY

STAR BOARD

STARBOARD

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by Starboard
This paperback edition published in 2026

Text © Piers Torday, 2025

Cover and map illustrations © Alla Khatkevich, 2025

The right of Piers Torday to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs & Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 786 54146 8

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Starboard
An imprint of Hachette Children's Group
Part of Hodder & Stoughton Limited
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

The authorised representative in the EEA is Hachette Ireland,
8 Castlecourt Centre, Dublin 15, D15 XTP3, Ireland (email: info@hbgi.ie).

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.hachettechildrens.co.uk

to Gyuri Sarossy, friend,
reader and fellow traveller

The wolf changes its fur but not its nature.

Transylvanian proverb


the WITCH HILLS
the BLACK MOUNTAIN
NORTH MARSHES
RIVER LUNE
RIVER NORTH
THE CLAW
THUNDER TRAIN LINE
LONGEST LAGOON
PRINCELAND
SNOWY MOUNTAINS
CHERRY COURT CAMP
HOUSE of GOLD
FOREST of the FLED
CITY of CASTLES
RIPPLING RIVER
N
W
E
S
50 miles



PART ONE
DEATH OF A WOLF



ONE

IF TIBOR SQUINTED, he could see through the waterfall, frozen solid but translucent like a bottle glass window. Beyond this wall of ice, the distant snow-covered valleys, woods and plains of Princeland shimmered in the early morning mist. And beyond that lay a whole empire, the vampirs' Claw – stretching from the monster-infested Thousand Islands in the north to the haunted Desert of the Dead in the south. To be ruler of such a magical realm was never a wish Tibor had sought, but at the age of just thirteen, it was now within his grasp.

He dreamed of other things, too. Although he would never admit it to anyone, not even his sister Roza, he still fantasised about becoming a werwolf one day, of running through the silent dark trees under a great moon.

But most of all, he dreamed of returning home. A return to his beloved House of Gold, where the evening light over the meadows was always soft and warm, where everything was safe and good.

Yet if anyone had told him – at that moment, in the cavern – what he would suffer for that dream in the days that followed, he would have closed his mind like a trap and never dared imagine so much as a single drop of sunlight ever again.

For now, he just wrapped his bear furs tighter around himself. Tongues of ice rippled over the cavern's limestone walls, but he drew warmth from his most treasured possession: a dusty lantern that rested on the ground. It was dark and unlit, but the comfort Tibor enjoyed came from the magic power within, and he picked up the lamp, holding it close to his chest.

It was nearly all he and Roza had in the world – apart from his precious pocket watch that still ticked away in his pocket, the only surviving inheritance from their parents.

Later, Roza would also wish that they had never found the Dark Lantern, or that they had left it hidden deep below in the ground. She knew the Lantern's power. Its light could grant dreams, making them real – and by doing so, it had given her a new life. Before, she had been a vampir transformed into a dog – and now she was just a mortal girl.

There was no going back.

Roza had seen what the vampir life – immortal and eternal – did to people, how it corrupted their souls, and was glad to be free of that prize.

As Tibor paced, she lay in her sleeping bag on a wooden trestle bed wedged up against the uneven cave wall, and spied some bats roosting in the dim vaults above. A softly rippling canopy of fangs and fur, a living shadow of her former vampir self. But they were not what made her shiver.

What she feared was both the unimaginable power in that Lantern – that could undo lives and remake worlds – and her brother's hunger for it.

'We are done with that magic of the dark,' she said again. 'Leave it be.'

Tibor scowled and grudgingly set it back down on the ground.

'You know we can't use that thing again,' Roza added. 'It kills people.' Every night, she still had nightmares, watching Baron Ambrus dissolve before them – melted into ash, his taloned arm outstretched. In self-defence? To strike them? Or to beg for mercy? They would never know.

'You mean it kills vampirs,' Tibor said.

'Not just vampirs. We don't know who else it might kill. Even by mistake.'

It was barely over a month since they had beaten the White Prince, the vampir emperor of their world, in the

race for the enchanted Midnight Treasure. Their guardian, Baron Ambrus, had betrayed them and perished in the Lantern's beam. The wizard who helped them, Professor Halim, had vanished with her assistant, Panina.

But Tibor and Roza's greatest discovery had been that they were not just best friends but twins. Their parents had been taken from them by the vampirs, who had hoped to stop the two children from ever discovering an inheritance more meaningful than any treasure.

They were heirs to the mortal throne of Princeland, a throne that had been stolen from their ancestors by the vampirs over five hundred years ago. Although the fact that they were heirs to so much as a crumb of bread became harder and harder to believe, every day they remained in hiding behind a waterfall in a freezing cavern.

'I wish they were here,' Tibor said.

'Who?'

'Our mother and father.'

'You keep saying that.'

'But we could be a family again. All back at home together. That's my dream.' He sighed, brushing a loose lock of hair back over his head. 'And we could ask them all those questions we don't know the answer to.'

'Such as?'

'Such as, do you seriously think we can do it? Two mortals defeat a vampir tyrant and take over his empire? How?'

She had lost count of how many times he had asked that question.

But neither of them was ready for the answer.



TWO

BEFORE ROZA COULD REPLY, there was a clatter of rocks from beyond the iced strands of the waterfall, and the children froze. They heard a muffled curse as someone slipped in a puddle, followed by more footsteps. Their discussion was forgotten in an instant; the pair looked at each other and knew immediately what to do next.

For they were not just any two mortals. The slayers of the White Prince's most trusted lieutenant, the Baron, the finders of *his* treasure and the pretenders to his throne, were now also the two most wanted people in the land.

There was danger around every corner, even here. Perhaps especially here, in this secret cave so high and hidden away from the world.

Tibor carefully returned the precious Lantern to a hiding place they had made, a hole in the wall concealed by a large

rollable boulder. Then, slinging his rucksack over his shoulder, he picked up two smaller rocks off the floor, handing one to his sister. The pair took their positions on either side of the waterfall, arms raised.

On her signal, they peered beyond the ice. The cavern looked out over a series of descending pools, which, in spring and summer, echoed with the roar of tumbling, shimmering water, but were now becalmed by the eerie silence of frost and snow. Climbing up from the riverbed over a series of snow-caked boulders and ice-lacquered footholds was possible, but the way was hard, steep, and treacherous.

However, it was also the *only* way, and it was one of the reasons this cave had been chosen as their hideout.

Beneath the ledge the children stood on, hidden from view by a jagged outcrop, someone was clambering up towards them with wheezing, heavy breaths.

They glanced at one another.

Tibor and Roza no longer had the immortal powers which would once have helped them against an enemy. This was the price paid to discover the Midnight Treasure.

To pass the silver lions which guarded the Lantern's hiding place, Tibor had had to relinquish his werwolf powers. Silver was the only metal which could harm such wolves, so he had walked through a burning arch of rose and alder, which purged the werwolf curse. He no longer had wolf senses, strength or reflexes.

And the Dark Lantern had granted both twins a dream of a world where Roza was no longer a vampir, and had lost the accompanying privilege of immortality.

Yet somehow, despite spells and dreams, their newly mortal bodies hadn't completely forgotten their former nature. They jumped lightly down into the snow behind the boulder, clutching their rocks, holding their breath.

But it wasn't an enemy. Wrapped in a fur cap and ear muffs, their ally Bravely – the towering chieftain of the Feather mercenaries – emerged from behind the stone. Seeing them, he roared with laughter. 'Do you think those pebbles would have been any match for me?'

He unbuttoned his long greatcoat to reveal enamelled daggers of different sizes hanging from the lining, with at least seven pearl-handled pistols stuck in cartridge belts crossed over his chest. And a sack, which he threw on to the snowy bank at their feet. 'There, that's for your young Majesties. Fresh water from a hill spring, drawn through the ice. Sheep's cheese, some preserved venison and brown bread. That will keep you going for a while longer.'

Tibor and Roza fell on his delivery. They may no longer have been wolf or dog, but they ripped the sack open, tore the cork from the ice-cold water flask and devoured the delicious, creamy cheese and seasoned meat on torn hunks of bread.

The warrior chieftain looked around at the high, rocky

ravine, the dwarf pines wedged into crevices above and the frozen pool. 'So. How long have you been hiding out here?'

'Just over a month, I suppose,' said Tibor.

'Have you recovered from your Spectre Night battles with vampirs, wizards and dragons?'

Cheeks bulging, the two nodded.

'In body and spirit?'

They nodded again.

'So I expect you have also had time to develop a plan. How to use your gifts, your magic treasure and your birthright to dislodge that vile serpent in the City of Castles from his throne.'

There was a long silence, apart from the sound of two very hungry children trying to finish swallowing their breakfasts.

'Please tell me you understand we need a plan,' said Bravely. 'This is not a game. I know it is hard, but there is a whole country, an empire and those allied to our cause who have their futures staked on what you two decide to do next.' A terrible silence filled the snow-bound ravine. 'Tibor. Roza. You found the Midnight Treasure, as we long believed you would. Now you have made your claim to the mortal crown, your birthright. So please, in the name of all that is light and good in this world of shadows, can we make a plan for *how* to take it?'



THREE

EVENTUALLY, ROZA FOUND SOME WORDS.

'Our problem is that my brother still doesn't know how to use the Dark Lantern,' she said.

'I know how to *use* it,' said Tibor testily. 'I turned you mortal and vaporised Baron Ambrus, didn't I?' He shrugged. 'I just don't know how to light it.'

'You don't *know*?' Bravely sounded incredulous. 'We are talking about the fate of a country. *Your* country.'

Tibor brushed some crumbs off his felt mountain jacket and tried to rise to the moment.

'We know dreams and nightmares can be set free by the power of the Lantern,' he explained. 'Every hope or fear that anyone has ever dreamed, since the dawn of time . . . can be brought to life by its magic fire.'

'But the only thing which could light it,' added Roza,

'Tibor's little statue of a Sleeping Knight—'

'Was destroyed in the Hall of the Seven Sovereigns by the Lantern's own beam,' said Tibor ruefully.

Bravely nodded, scratching his chin. He pointed at Tibor's rucksack on the ground beside them. 'What does the book say?'

'I do have a name, you know!' came a weary voice from the bag.

'*Oh, please forgive me,*' said Bravely, making a mock gesture of praying apology with his hands. 'What does the mighty Grimoire know about the Dark Lantern?'

There was an agitated rustling, like a wind blowing through the trees, and some papery hands pulled open the rucksack from the inside, and a large, leather-bound tome clambered out. The oldest and most complete compendium of magic spells and lore in the empire (on permanent loan from the wizard Professor Halim's private library) wore an indignant frown.

'A good deal more than you, *warrior*,' snorted Grimoire. His pages ruffled briskly before falling open under 'L'.

'The Dark Lantern,' he started to read, 'was forged in the fires of the Black Mountain, the volcano which towers over the Witch Hills, and was first lit by a flame from its crater. It came into being at the same time as the vampirs and werwolves came from the darkness below, and the dragons first flew in these skies. Now the Sleeping Knight has been

lost, the only way to light the Lantern again . . . is with fire from the Black Mountain itself.'

'Which has been extinct for five hundred years,' said Tibor. Every Princeland schoolchild knew the founding story of the Claw – created from the explosion of darkness from the Black Mountain. A volcanic eruption which changed the course of history.

'Is there no other way?' asked Roza.

Books don't often look dreamily into the distance as if remembering their long-forgotten schooldays, but this one did. 'As it happens, all this happened shortly after I was first written, if you must know. One day, I shall be reunited with the hill witch who first scribed me, who might be able to tell us—'

'That's not good enough!' said Bravely. 'Do you understand? We can't just wait for "one day". Besides, there are no hill witches left alive. You stole the most wanted treasure in the kingdom from under the nose of the White Prince. You think he is sitting around, waiting for you to find out how it works?'

Tibor pulled at one of his woollen socks. 'We *are* making a plan.'

Roza nodded. 'Yes. We just need a bit more time.'

But Bravely's scowl only deepened. 'There is no more time! We have protected you long enough. We chose these slopes to hide in because they are high and remote, hard to

get to, even for vampirs.' He looked around warily at the impassive snow-clad summits, as if one of them might suddenly gobble him up.

As well he might – the Feathers had sought out the most inaccessible slopes of the entire Snowy Mountains for the children to hide in. The ravine formed a cleft between Snake Head, Spider Leg and Rat Tail peaks. One glance at their distinctive, distorted silhouettes left no doubt as to why they had been so named. Their sharp peaks and sheer sides, often hidden by heavy clouds, had been the end of many an unwary traveller – that was, if they had made it past the deadly, deep crevasses which scarred the slopes . . .

'But others have not been so lucky.'

'What do you mean?' asked Roza, and she could sense the words freeze with dread as they left her body.

He sighed. 'I did not tell you because . . . because we wanted you to recover, build up your strength in this hidden place. Remember that only I know of its location. Not even your closest friends do.' It had been a long time since Tibor and Roza had seen even their old Feather allies, such as Oldest, Slightly and Small, who had guided them nearly every step of the way to the Midnight Treasure. 'But you can no longer remain here.'

The twins glanced at each other. The morning sun shone brightly on the iced pool, fringing the fresh snowfall with pale fire.

'Vampirs can't cross running water!'

'Does this water look like it's running to you?' snapped Bravely, pointing to the frozen pool and waterfall. 'Perhaps it was when you first hid out here a month ago. Now winter is here.'

'But vampirs still have to be invited into places,' said Roza. 'Don't they?'

And everyone knew what happened to a vampir who tried to enter a place without an invitation. All their power and strength vanished in minutes, a storm cloud dispersed by sunlight.

'That is not why you must leave!' thundered Bravely.

He squatted down by the children, screwing up his eyes against the dazzling sun. It was a beautiful morning, but he knew that the bluest sky in the world could not lighten the news he carried.

And so he told them how the White Prince had taken his revenge – for the theft of a treasure he regarded as his.



FOUR

'IT HAS TAKEN SOME TIME for the news to reach us, high up in these crags,' Bravely continued. 'But since you first lit the Dark Lantern, deep underground in the Hall of the Seven, terrible things have befallen this land. Friend by friend, ally by ally, word has slowly made its way to our ears.'

Tibor and Roza understood. The Feathers were the only mortals of the Claw who could never be turned into a vampir or werwolf. But their price for this blessing was to be exiled by the Prince and condemned to a wandering life, forbidden ever to settle. It had also made them become the fiercest warriors for hire in the Claw and, for the twins, the staunchest of allies.

'There is a reason the White Prince remains as feared as he is, even after that immortal serpent has been on the throne

for five hundred years. He has taken his revenge against you for besting him in the treasure hunt for the Midnight Treasure, and sent his monsters to destroy everything and everyone who helped you.'

Tibor's eyes widened. '*Everyone*?'

'The Village of the Sun, where you were both born, has been razed to the ground by vampir horsemen with flaming torches. Every cave in those hills that once contained so much as a coin of treasure has been sealed up again by stonemasons for eternity. But not before the vampirs grabbed any living local within snatching distance and put them in there first.'

Roza closed her eyes and clutched Tibor's hand. This was not their fault.

Innocent people entombed alive in revenge – for what? Recovering a stupid dark lantern that they could not even use any more.

Bravely continued. 'Our old Feather camp in the Gorge of Gloom was burned to a crisp, too. We expected this, which is why we retreated up here. No one was killed, apart from a few of our livestock still kept there.'

'But Agnes is all right?' said Roza. 'Please tell me that.'

Agnes, the water buffalo, had carried Roza and Tibor all the way across the Prince's Plain and helped destroy a demon of the dark sent to stop them discovering their destiny.

'Oh, Agnes is more than all right. You will see for

yourselves. But as for the rest of our friends . . .' He shook his head. 'The Forest of the Fled has been felled—'

'The tree bears? Bear Man?' asked Tibor.

'We don't know. Disappeared. We must hope for the best.'

People disappeared, forests destroyed and animals vanished. For a moment, Tibor wondered if he really wanted to rule this world, whether he even could – whether anyone could. Roza tried to dispel her similar thoughts by concentrating again on the beauty of the snow-covered forests, the mountains wreathed in rosy clouds and the brilliant power of the sun in the morning.

Was that what they were fighting to save? Was that all that was left?

The pair sat in silence while Bravely told them of villages whose inhabitants' only crime had been to offer them food and water, or shelter, along their journey from the City of Castles – where entire populations had vanished. And in the capital itself, the tailor who made Tibor's evening dress, the waiters who served them in a hotel restaurant, and fellow passengers on trains and trams had all disappeared into the cells deep below the Prince's Palace.

A place from which few ever returned.

When he had finished, Bravely produced a flask, which he unscrewed to pour them small tin cups of Feather coffee. It was a uniquely awful drink that tasted – to his

young allies – of boiling mud, but they had never been more grateful for its warmth.

'So,' said Tibor, gripping the hot cup, 'now everyone hates the vampirs more than ever before.' He looked up hopefully. 'Do you think they will rise up in revolution? Maybe they don't even need us any more.'

Bravely shook his head.

'It'll be the opposite,' Roza said confidently. 'The people want us to hurry up and save them, don't they?' She winced as she took a steaming sip of the vile liquid. 'That's why you're here.'

Bravely did not touch his drink, staring gloomily into its swirling brown depths.

'No,' he said, eventually. 'It's neither of those things. The people blame you. For everything.' He rose, patting snow off his coarse, baggy trousers. 'Come with me. You have been summoned to meet the Wise Ones.'