

*"Not everything may be as it seems"*

# GOBLIN HALL

A FANTASY ADVENTURE

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– CHAPTER ONE –

**THE PRESENT DAY –  
A SCOTTISH COUNTRY VILLAGE...**

Maggie McKim's heart was heavy. Just turned thirty, she had been left to care for her two children alone, following the recent death of her husband Jim. Moving into a little cottage after living in the rambling old manse which had gone with Jim's position as parish minister didn't bother her, but the thought of bringing up two young children without him certainly did. At only seven and five respectively, little Susie and Jamie were at an age when a father's influence and support were needed most, but now it was up to Maggie to cope as best she could on her own. The prospect frightened her, she had to admit, but for the children's sake she had no choice but to put on a brave face and try to make life seem as normal as possible.

She signed the removal man's list, thanked him and turned to go indoors. Charlie, the family's tiny mongrel dog, came running round the side of the cottage, tongue hanging out, tail wagging, eyes sparkling, full of the joys.

Maggie bent down to tickle his chin. ‘Well, Charlie, been exploring your new garden, have you? Plenty nice new smells to sniff, are there?’

Charlie yelped a ‘You bet!’ little bark, then trotted over to the side of the front door, lifted his leg and shot a squirt or two of territory-marking pee on the old iron boot scraper.

Maggie chuckled and shook her head. If only life could be as simple and carefree for her as it appeared to be for Charlie. She paused to look at her new home – the first chance she’d had to grab a moment’s respite in days. Moving house was indeed an exhausting business, and there was lots of work still to do. For all that, she gladly admitted there were worse places to have moved to than Cantrip Cottage, sitting as it did on the edge of the pretty village of Burnford, with a little valley called Trowie Glen at the back, and beyond that the wooded hills of the Scottish countryside.

It was all very tranquil and picturesque, and Maggie smiled as she told herself that she and the children would be fine here. Life without Jim wasn’t going to be easy, but she realised that she was luckier than many in her shoes. At least she had a little place she’d soon make into a comfortable home. Yes, she, Susie and Jamie would be fine. Holding that positive thought, Maggie opened the door for the patiently-waiting Charlie and followed him inside.

Old Effie had been Maggie’s housekeeper back at the manse, and as she lived at this side of the village herself, she’d insisted on helping her move into the

cottage. When Maggie entered the living room, Effie was already fussing about with the three-piece suite, placing an easy chair here, rolling the sofa there, standing back to have a look, tutting, then rearranging everything again.

‘Don’t go bothering yourself with that,’ said Maggie. ‘Honestly, Effie, you’ve done more than enough for one day.’

‘Och, but you can’t do all this by yourself, Mrs McKim.’ Effie nodded towards the piles of cardboard boxes the removal men had dumped on the floor. ‘I mean, just look at it!’

Maggie laid a hand on Effie’s shoulder. ‘Come on, sit down and take the weight off your feet. I’ll make us a nice cuppa. I think we deserve it, hmm?’

‘No, no, no,’ Effie objected, ‘you’ve more to worry about than me and my feet, Mrs McKim.’ But she sat down on the sofa all the same.

Maggie was already at the kitchen door. ‘Just you relax,’ she called back. ‘Oh, and it’s Maggie, by the way. I think we can forget about all that formal Mrs McKim stuff now, don’t you?’

Effie surveyed the topsy-turvy state of the room, her brows gathering into a frown. ‘What would the poor Reverend say if he could see what’s become of his bonny wife and nice wee bairns now?’ she muttered to herself, her bottom lip quivering. ‘Aye, and him that young too.’ The old woman looked over to where Susie and Jamie were poring over a picture book at a table in front of the window. ‘The poor wee mites,’ she sniffed, and dabbed her eyes with her hankie. ‘The poor wee mites.’

‘The usual two sugars?’ Maggie shouted from the kitchen.

‘Oh, uh-huh, please, Mrs ehm...’ Effie warbled, unable to disguise the sadness in her voice.

‘Stop it, Charlie!’ Susie scolded, after the little dog had leapt onto a chair next to her and tried to nose his way into the company of his two young playmates. ‘Me and Jamie are busy!’ With that, she continued to explain in hushed tones to her little brother some fascinating detail or other in their book.

Maggie came back into the room carrying a tea tray. ‘It’s “Jamie and I”, Susie,’ she pointed out, ‘not “me and Jamie”. I keep telling you that, don’t I?’

Susie didn’t even look up. ‘Yes, yes, OK, Mum,’ she mumbled, clearly not having taken in a word her mother had said.

‘Anything to drink for you two?’ Maggie enquired. ‘Milk, Jamie? Orange juice or something, Susie?’

‘No thanks, Mum,’ the children replied in unison, their eyes fixed firmly on the book lying open in front of them.

Effie took a sip of her tea, then cast her eyes sadly round the room. ‘This wee place – I mean, what a change this must be for you, Mrs McKim – after living in that grand big manse and everything.’

‘Not a bit of it,’ Maggie chirped. ‘No, no, I was brought up in a house even smaller than this, and it’ll suit our purpose just fine, believe me. To tell you the truth, I’m only too pleased the church offered to rent it to me, otherwise we’d...’ She stopped short, something through the window having caught her eye. ‘What – who on *earth* is that?’

Effie stood up and shuffled over to the window, half-closing her eyes, trying to focus.

Susie and Jamie followed the old housekeeper's gaze, nudging each other as they noticed the figure of an old man, standing alone beneath a dead tree on top of a grassy little hill some distance behind the house. His long, wispy hair and flowing robe were blowing in the breeze. He was looking skywards, his hands outstretched, as if offering up some sort of prayer.

'Ach, it's just Mr Mungo,' Effie finally grunted. 'Always doing that. Fair gives you the willies, so it does!'

Maggie had joined Effie by the window. 'But – but what in heaven's name is he doing – you know, just standing there like that, looking at ... nothing?'

Effie merely shrugged, her expression a mix of indifference and distrust.

Puzzled, Maggie shook her head. 'Mr Mungo, you say. But I've never heard of ... I mean, I thought I knew *everyone* in the village.'

'Only arrived a week or so back,' Effie said. 'From nowhere. Moved into that wee cottage down the bottom of the glen there.' She pointed through the window. 'Granny Carlin's place. Aye, he moved in just after she passed away.' Effie cupped a hand to her mouth, then, hoping the children wouldn't hear, whispered in Maggie's ear, 'Granny Carlin ... her they called a witch.'

Maggie gave a little smile, though a frown creased her forehead for a second. She hoped they weren't going to be living close to some old weirdo

with habits that might scare the children. That's *all* she needed!

Susie and Jamie exchanged knowing glances. Then, while their mother and Effie returned to the sofa with their cups of tea, they redirected their eyes to their book. It was open at a drawing of an old man, who was dressed and looked exactly like the one they could see through the window. More fascinating still, the picture also showed him standing in a similar pose beneath the branches of a dead tree on top of a windswept hill.

Susie ran her finger slowly along the caption beneath the picture. '*The Wizard Of The Glen*', she told her little brother in a whisper.

Unaware of the children's discovery, Effie jerked her head in the direction of the window. 'Aye – Mr Mungo, your new neighbour,' she muttered to Maggie out of the corner of her mouth, then shuddered, her teacup rattling on its saucer. 'Fair gives me the heebie-jeebies, so he does!'

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– CHAPTER TWO –

**LATER THAT MORNING –  
AT THE FOOT OF TROWIE GLEN...**

Granny Carlin's cottage was said to be the oldest lived-in house in the area. Its roof had been clad in red pantiles for as long as anyone could remember, although the tiny building probably dated from times when thatch, or perhaps even turf, was used instead. The cottage didn't boast much in the way of modern conveniences. It had no electricity or gas, no telephone or TV, and the only source of water was an ancient hand-operated pump, of the type reproduced in fibreglass these days to stand alongside plastic gnomes and fake wishing wells in trim suburban gardens.

But this simple little abode was sufficient for old Mungo's needs. He knew well enough that Granny Carlin had been regarded as a witch by some of the village folk, and that was fine by his way of thinking. Just why they had doubted her supernatural powers was the only thing that puzzled him. Anyway, he was happy to be living in the cottage now. He had known the location intimately many, many years

ago, and he loved it dearly – no matter how time had changed everything, and not really for the better, in his opinion. However, sitting on his rickety rocking chair by the front door, as he was now, and looking over the burn towards the woods on the other side of the glen, he could still be living in his glory days of long ago ... *if* he gave free rein to his imagination.

‘*Al-ga-boo-ra-ba zi-ba-no*, Jake,’ he enunciated patiently to the young jackdaw sitting on his hand, its head cocked inquisitively to one side, its pale blue eyes gleaming like tiny glass marbles. ‘Repeat after me, Jake ... *Al-ga-boo-ra-ba zi-ba-no*.’

The jackdaw said nothing.

Mungo sighed and got to his feet.

‘You a wizard?’

Startled, Jake flew off, while Mungo glanced down in the direction of the question. Susie and Jamie were standing there looking up at him, with Charlie the dog by their side.

‘You a wizard?’ Susie repeated.

Mungo peered at the children over the top of the half-moon spectacles that were perched on the end of his nose, giving him the appearance of an amiable, if somewhat skinny, old owl. ‘Hello,’ he smiled. ‘Where did you appear fro–?’

‘Why were you saying funny words to that crow?’ Susie cut in.

‘You mean Jake? Well, uhm, Jake’s a jackdaw actually. Hmm.’

Susie stared thoughtfully at Mungo for a moment. ‘Our book says wizards can talk to jackdaws.’

‘*My* book,’ Jamie corrected. ‘*Wizard of the Hen*’.

Scowling, Susie nudged her little brother with her elbow. ‘Glen, silly. It’s *Wizard of the Glen*.’

‘And does your book also say that jackdaws can talk to wizards?’ Mungo asked.

‘Yes,’ Susie and Jamie confirmed in concert.

The old man hunched his shoulders. ‘Well, ’fraid my one can’t. Stupid bird.’

‘Get a budgie,’ Jamie advised. ‘Our granny’s got a budgie and it can talk.’

‘Wizards don’t have budgies, silly,’ Susie said under her breath.

Jamie gave that some thought, then looked up at Mungo again. ‘You a wizard, mister?’ he pressed.

‘Well, uhm, yes ... yes, as a matter of fact I am,’ Mungo said, surprising himself by having seemed a bit reluctant to admit it. ‘A wizard? Yes, I am, uhm ... actually. Yes.’

‘Can you do magic?’ Jamie enquired, hopefully.

Mungo chuckled to himself. He was enjoying the interest the children were taking in him. ‘Magic? Yes, I – I can. But I’m, well, I’m sort of semi-retired these days, you see.’ He scratched his head. ‘But, uh, let’s see now.’ He beckoned Jamie to step nearer, then reached down and produced a copper coin from the little boy’s nose. ‘There! What do you think of *that*?’

Susie was clearly unimpressed. ‘That’s not real magic,’ she scoffed. ‘Our Daddy could do that. Yes, and he’s only a minister.’

‘Well, you know – magic, miracles, all much the same really,’ Mungo blustered, feeling embarrassed. ‘When, uh, when you come to think of it, that is.’

Jamie stared at him, expressionless. ‘Our Daddy’s in heaven now.’

The old fellow’s eyes misted over. ‘Oh, my... Sorry, I –’

‘Why be sorry?’ Susie interrupted. ‘Heaven’s a nice place.’

‘Yes,’ Jamie agreed, ‘and our Mummy says we’re all going to see Daddy there some day.’

Mungo smiled kindly at Jamie and ruffled his hair. ‘And so you will ... if you believe. Everything is possible, if you really believe, you know.’

Jamie looked down at his feet, muttering: ‘I really believe I’d like to see Daddy, *now*.’

A moment of awkward silence followed, broken by Jake the jackdaw fluttering down onto the guttering above the cottage door. ‘*Boorabba!*’ he confidently squawked. ‘*Algaboorabba!*’

Mungo was flabbergasted. He stood gazing wide-eyed at Jake. ‘At last!’ he grinned. ‘He’s finally –’

‘*Algaboorabba!*’ Jake repeated.

Susie and Jamie burst into fits of giggles.

Charlie the dog let out a nervous little growl and took a couple of cautious steps backwards.

‘*Alga-thingy*,’ Susie said to Mungo, ‘– is that a magic word?’

‘Well... yes. But, uhm, you have to add –’

‘*Zibanno*,’ Jake butted in. ‘*Algaboorabba zibanno!*’

There was a minor thunder clap and a flash of lightning, a momentary rush of howling wind, then a bright gold coin dropped from Jamie’s nose and landed at his feet. Charlie whimpered and cowered behind Susie’s legs. Staring at the coin, the children

gasped in amazement. After a moment or two, Jamie hesitantly touched his nose, as if afraid it might burn his finger.

Old Mungo couldn't hide his delight at Jake's sudden and unexpected show, not just of speaking, but of magical ability too. The old man bent down and picked up the glittering coin. 'Well, well, well,' he beamed, 'would you believe it?'

Jake, thoroughly pleased with himself, gave a cackling laugh, then triumphantly cawed, '*Algaboorabba Zibanno!*'

Up at her cottage, meanwhile, Maggie was busy cleaning windows. She couldn't actually see Mungo and the children from where she was, but she could hear the thunder and see the flashes of lightning coming from somewhere at the foot of the glen. 'There it goes again,' she said to herself. 'What on *earth*...?'

Back at Mungo's cottage, Susie squealed in delight as a gold coin dropped from her nose this time.

Smiling to himself, Mungo picked up the coin. 'Would you believe it?' he said again, then looked up to where Jake was perched above the cottage door. 'Clever boy! Here, Jake – come and see.'

Jake swooped down and landed on Mungo's shoulder, whereupon the old man produced a titbit from a pocket in his robe and popped it into the eager young jackdaw's beak.

'*Stupid bird!*' squawked Jake, showing off now. '*Silly bugger!*'

A shocked, sharp intake of breath was the children's immediate reaction to Jake's unexpected but fluently-delivered swear word. Mungo was abashed to the point of being dumbstruck. But his embarrassment was relieved slightly by Susie and Jamie dissolving into fits of tittering.

'Oh, my, m-my,' Mungo stammered, 'I really am very —'

'Bugger!' said Jamie, straight-faced, then joined Susie in another outburst of giggling.

Smitten by the children's infectious sense of mischief, Mungo smiled, tentatively at first, then grinned, before joining in the laughter himself, his eyes twinkling like little black pearls as he handed Susie and Jamie their gold coins.

'Well, really,' he panted, wiping his eyes while struggling to regain his composure, 'I really don't know where he heard such language. No, I really don't.'

Almost as if in response to his master's somewhat lame protestation, Jake let out a volley of croaky chuckles, plopped a large dropping onto Mungo's shoulder, then flew away. Susie and Jamie covered their mouths with their hands, trying hard not to start sniggering again.

Mungo gave them an enquiring look, then glanced round at his shoulder. 'Oh, no!' he groaned. 'If I've told that bird once that it isn't polite to do that, I've told him a hundred times.'

By this time, the children were purple in the face with bottled up glee. Mungo looked at them again and, despite himself, felt a giggle building up inside

as well. A moment later, all three were engulfed in yet more floods of laughter.

Susie was laughing so much she almost choked. ‘That’s – that’s ’cause you told a fib about not knowing how the bird knows that bad word,’ she spluttered, pointing at the jackdaw dump dribbling down Mungo’s robe.

Just then, a call of ‘*Susie! Jamie!*’ rang out across the valley, and the children turned round to see their mother stepping purposefully down the grassy slope from her cottage. ‘I thought I told you two not to wander off!’

‘Mummy,’ Jamie piped up, keen to be first to divulge the reason for the present outbreak of hilarity, ‘this old man’s got a blackbird and –’

Stopping Jamie short in mid sentence, Maggie extended her hand to Mungo. ‘Hello there. You must be Mr Mungo,’ she smiled. ‘I’m Maggie – Maggie McKim – from Cantrip Cottage, up the glen there.’

‘Ah, enchanted to meet you, dear lady,’ Mungo smiled back. He bowed courteously and shook Maggie’s hand.

Jamie could hardly contain himself. ‘But, Mummy,’ he persisted, ‘the blackbird said bu–’

‘Sh-h-h, Jamie! I’m talking, and you know it’s rude to interrupt.’ Maggie turned again to Mungo. ‘I hope Susie and Jamie haven’t been annoying you.’

‘No, no, Mistress McKim – on the contrary. No, I haven’t laughed so much for ages.’ He scratched his head again. ‘Well, not for a century or two anyway.’

Maggie smiled, weakly. ‘Hmm, yes ... quite.’

Susie tapped her mother’s elbow. ‘Mummy, Jamie

said bu—’

Mungo faked a cough. ‘A-*hum!* And, uh, it’s just Mungo, dear lady. No Mister.’

Maggie was taken aback. ‘Oh dear, I’m really sorry. Really, I didn’t realise it was your first name. Please forgive me. I didn’t mean to be forward, honestly, Mr, uhm...?’

‘Mungo.’

‘Mungo? But, ehm...’ Maggie was becoming more confused by the second.

Mungo shrugged. ‘Just Mungo. I only have the one name, you see. We, uh, we *all* do.’

‘We?’

‘He’s a wizard,’ Susie offered by way of explanation.

‘And his blackbird said bugger,’ Jamie announced, grabbing the opportunity to get a word in edgeways at last.

Maggie glared at her little son, who, radiating innocence, returned her glare with a grin.

Susie sniggered behind her hand.

‘He, uhm, Jake – he’s a jackdaw, actually,’ Mungo flustered. He flashed Maggie a sheepish smile. ‘Not a blackbird – a jackdaw – a young one. Just learning to speak.’ Mungo cleared his throat. ‘Yes, well, he – he probably meant to say beggar ... or, you know, burglar. All the same to a rookie jackdaw, I suppose.’

The arching of an unconvinced eyebrow was Maggie’s response to that one.

An uncomfortable little lull in the conversation followed, during which Jamie put a thumb to one of his nostrils and snorted loudly down the other.

‘Jamie!’ Maggie exclaimed. ‘That’s absolutely

disgusting!’

‘He’s trying to magic out some more money,’ Susie explained

Maggie shook her head despairingly. ‘Their father – he – well, he used to do that old sleight of hand trick for them,’ she told Mungo. ‘You know the one – pennies popping out of their noses.’

Mungo gave her an understanding smile.

Jamie, meanwhile, was applying a thumb to his other nostril, concentrating hard. ‘*Boola-boola-boola*,’ he droned, then blasted another nasal snort. Another unsuccessful one.

‘*Boola-boola*’s not the magic word, silly,’ Susie scoffed.

Jamie scowled and stuck a finger up his nose, totally bamboozled.

Maggie was trying to smile through her embarrassment. ‘Look, sorry about all this,’ she said to Mungo. ‘They’re reading a book about a wizard just now, you see. And, well, you know how it is – every elderly gentleman they see at the moment is a wizard, every big new word a magic spell.’

Mungo nodded, knowingly. ‘They believe.’

‘Yes, I’m afraid they do. Just at that gullible age. Still, only fairy stories – won’t do them any harm, I suppose.’

A self-assured look came to Mungo’s face. ‘Believe in the good, deny the bad.’ He shook his head. ‘Not gullible, Mistress McKim. Wise. Your children are at that *wise* age.’ He wagged a finger at Maggie. ‘Don’t spoil them. Let them believe.’

This was all beginning to make Maggie feel distinctly uncomfortable. She couldn't say she was getting any really *bad* vibes from this dotty old guy, but she didn't need a lecture from him on how to bring up her kids either. Besides, what was all this dressing-up-in-long-robcs thing about? Time to put out a feeler or two...

'Ehm, I hope you don't mind my asking, Mister, uhm, Mungo, but where are you from? I mean, before you came to live here, that is.'

Mungo's eyes twinkled and he gave a little chuckle. 'Me? Oh, everywhere, really – at some time or other.' He paused to stroke his chin for a moment. 'Mind you, now that I think about it, I haven't been to Outer Mongolia for a while. Hmm, couldn't get on with that terrible fellow Khan. Yes ... what did they call him again?'

Maggie squinted at him. 'Not – not *Genghis*, by any –?'

'Yes! That's him! Genghis Khan ... the very one!' Mungo became pensive again. 'Mmm, Genghis Khan. He suffered from constipation, you know. And no wonder – eating all those sheep's eyeballs. A unique outlook on life, some said his diet gave him. Hmm, nasty fellow, all the same.'

Maggie scrutinised Mungo's face, looking for a sign that he might be joking. But it seemed the old boy was being deadly serious. 'You – you're saying you actually *knew*...?'

'Genghis Khan? Oh yes. Didn't like him at all. Bad table manners too. Flatulence, you know. Hmm, the

big wind from the Steppes, some used to call him.’

‘But he lived over eight hundred years ago, for heaven’s sake!’

‘Yes, doesn’t time fly,’ Mungo nodded, then added with a wink, ‘when you’re having fun, as they say.’

That did it for Maggie. She took Susie and Jamie by the shoulders. ‘Come on! Time to go home! Time to let Mister – to let *Mungo* here get on with his –’

‘No hurry,’ Mungo interrupted, a smile on his lips that would have warmed the iciest of hearts. He gestured towards his cottage door. ‘Come inside. Have a cup of tea. Yes, tea. I, uh, I picked some fresh nettles this morning. Or if you prefer,’ he continued, noticing Maggie’s less than keen reaction, ‘I have some nice dried dandelion leaves. They make a tasty brew. Ah! Very good for the digestion too, dandelion leaves ... as you probably know.’ He winked again. ‘If only Genghis Khan had known as well, eh?’

Maggie was already shepherding the children away. ‘No – no thank you, all the same. Perhaps ... well, maybe some other –’

‘*Yoo-hoo! Yoo-hoo-oo-oo!*’ It was old Effie’s shrill voice, reverberating down the glen from outside the back door of Maggie’s cottage. ‘Phone call for you Mrs McKim!’

Flustered, Maggie spoke to the children first. ‘Look, I’ll have to rush. But you two follow *right* after me. Understand?’

‘Ye-e-e-s, Mum,’ they droned.

‘*Telephone!*’ Effie yelled, but with some urgency now.

‘Sorry, Mr, ehm...’ Maggie called over her

shoulder as she set off up the hillside. ‘As I say, perhaps some other...’

Mungo gave her a wave and a smile. ‘Don’t you go worrying, mistress. We’ll have that cup of brew another time, sure enough.’

Susy and Jamie, who had scarcely taken their eyes off Mungo, were clearly now more interested in resuming their dialogue with him than obeying their mother’s order to head straight home.

‘Our book says wizards can make things fly,’ Susie stated for openers.

‘Very true,’ Mungo affirmed, pursing his lips and nodding. ‘Very true.’

‘So?’ Susie prompted.

Mungo raised a wary eyebrow, but said nothing.

‘So, can *you*?’

‘M-make things fly?’

‘That’s right.’

Mungo shrugged, trying to appear more sure of himself than he actually felt. ‘Why, yes. Well, I used to. But, as I say, I – I’m sort of retired now.’ He rolled his shoulders. ‘You know, sort of ... resting.’

‘Mummy makes me rest when I’m tired too,’ Jamie confessed with a sigh.

Susie tutted and glared at her little brother in the way big sisters do. ‘*Re*-tired, silly! That’s different from just tired. *Re*-tired only affects very old people.’

Old Mungo didn’t seem to have heard this little exchange. He was gazing up the glen, deep in thought. ‘It’s the Power,’ he said, as if to himself. ‘Yes, I’ve let the Power slip a bit of late, I’m afraid.’

Susie and Jamie followed the old man’s gaze to

the hill where they'd seen him standing under a dead tree earlier in the day.

'Hmm, the Power,' Mungo murmured trance-like, while a peal of thunder rumbled in the distance.

Susie was intrigued, but Jamie's mind was on something else. 'Can you make Jasper fly?' he asked Mungo.

This jolted the old man out of his musing. 'Oh!' he gasped, clearly surprised to see a white mouse hanging by its tail from the little boy's fingers.

'Well, *can* you?' Jamie urged.

Mungo grinned self-confidently. 'Make a mouse fly? Easy!' But the smile then faded from his face. He shuffled his feet. 'Well, uhm, it *used* to be easy, but as I say – since I sort of retired...'

Susie wasn't slow to stick the verbal boot in. 'You can't do it, can you?'

'Yes, I – I mean, no,' Mungo stammered. 'Well, yes, but it's just that...' Stuck for words, he lowered his eyes.

Jamie frowned, clearly disillusioned, then stuffed Jasper the mouse back into his pocket.

Susie took her little brother by the arm, preparing to leave, but hesitated, struck by a sudden thought. 'Oh, and give me your penny, Jamie,' she said.

Jamie duly gave her the gold coin which Jake the jackdaw had magicked from his nose.

Susie then handed Mungo Jamie's gold coin, and her own. 'Here,' she snapped, somehow managing to look up at Mungo while looking down her nose at the same time, 'you can work your silly conjuring tricks on somebody else!' With that, she told Jamie

in a stage whisper that Mungo wasn't a real wizard. The two children then trudged contemptuously off, with Charlie the dog trotting faithfully behind.

Crestfallen, Mungo watched them go, his thoughts in turmoil. 'No! Wait!' he called after a moment. 'Come back ... please!'

The children stopped and turned to face him, their expressions daring him not to disappoint them again.

As a counter measure, Mungo immediately adopted a self-assured attitude – or at least did his best to fake one. 'I can, I *will* do it!' he told himself, then motioned to Jamie. 'The mouse. Give me – I mean, h-hand me the mouse ... please.'

Jamie wasn't sure. 'You'll make him fly?' he asked, warily.

'Of course! Why not? I've done it hundreds of times. Thousands. Millions. I mean, where do you think bats came from?'

All Jamie knew about bats was that he didn't like them. Old Effie said that, if they got tangled in your hair, you had to have it all cut off to get them out. So, he wasn't interested in where bats came from, just so long as they didn't come near *him*. Still, what old Mungo had claimed sounded fairly convincing. Jamie pulled the white mouse from his pocket and handed it over, albeit a little reluctantly. 'Don't be fright'ed, Jasper,' he murmured while stroking the little creature's head. 'I'm here.'

If Jasper cared one way or the other, he certainly didn't show it, sniffing about short-sightedly on the palm of Mungo's hand, whiskers twitching. The prospect of a nice morsel of cheese or chocolate may

well have been on his mind – although, unlike his young owner, concerns about whether or not he was about to become airborne were, presumably, farthest from his thoughts.

Mungo, meanwhile, was well aware that this was make-or-break time: perhaps his one and only chance to prove to the children that he was indeed a genuine wizard, and not just a long-haired old oddball who made boasts he couldn't live up to. Calming himself, he cradled Jasper in his hands, closed his eyes, took a slow, deep breath, then pulled himself up to his full height, his head tilted backwards.

Susie and Jamie looked on, enthralled, impatient for the real magic stuff to start.

'*O-o-oh-h-h, baglan-nalgab,*' Mungo moaned, his voice trembling. '*Baglanagab-hum-m-m.*'

Jasper, still wingless, continued to sniff about on the palms of the old man's hands, blissfully unaware of the unfolding drama in which he was sharing a starring role. Susie and Jamie swapped doubting glances.

Strange, guttural noises began to gurgle in Mungo's throat. Then he started to quiver, very slightly at first, the movements gradually becoming more pronounced, until his whole body was shaking like a jelly. Suddenly, he opened his eyes wide.

'*Baglanagab zibanno!*' he yelled, leaping up and throwing Jasper into the air with a frantic shout of, '*FLY!*'

Fascinated, Susie and Jamie watched the mouse spin upwards to a height of a metre or so, only to be drawn back down by the force of gravity into Mungo's trembling hands. He smiled sheepishly

at the children, who glowered back, conspicuously unimpressed. ‘Uhm-ah, lack of practice,’ he said with an embarrassed little laugh. ‘Lack of the Power, you know. Still, second time lucky, eh?’

After clearing his throat, Mungo started his warm-up routine all over again, though taking not one, but several deep breaths this time. The gurgling noises and trembling started as before, but even louder and more violent now. Startled by this grotesque ritual, the children clung to each other as Mungo began another spell...

‘*O-o-oh-h-h, baglan-baglan,*’ he moaned, his voice rising. ‘*Baglanagab ooblan moosus!*’ Then, with a sudden leap, he threw Jasper as high as he could, yelling, ‘*Zibanno-o-o! Baglanagab zibanno-o-o! FLY, OH MOUSE!*’

Mungo and the children looked up open-mouthed at the somersaulting Jasper reaching a height of four metres, where he hovered for a tantalising moment before starting to drop earthwards again. Then, just as Susie was about to voice her dissatisfaction in no uncertain terms, there was a loud ‘*POP!*’, and the mouse was engulfed in an explosion of dazzling light, suspended in mid air like a miniature distress flare.

The children caught their breaths. Charlie growled nervously behind their legs, while a smile of relieved optimism began to spread over Mungo’s face. He continued to stare upwards, his eyes on sticks.

‘Spread your wings, oh tiny one!’ he implored.

But no sooner had the halo of light around Jasper started to dissolve than it became apparent that,

instead of sprouting wings, he was self-inflating, expanding in circumference until he became a football-size mouse-balloon, drifting in the breeze and squeaking in bewilderment.

‘Oops!’ muttered Mungo, mortified.

‘Jasper!’ whispered Jamie, distraught.

‘*That’s* not really flying!’ Susie declared as she scowled her disapproval.

‘Try telling that to the mouse,’ the old man mumbled, his expression a strange mix of satisfaction and worry, while he watched the victim of his bungled magic floating up, up and away.

Then, with another ‘*POP!*’, followed by a sort of high-pitched farting sound, Jasper began to deflate, zig-zagging at speed towards his launch pad, Mungo’s outstretched hands.

Susie and Jamie clung to each other again, almost afraid to look at their pet spiralling out of control. Grimacing, Mungo closed his eyes, waiting for the impact. Yet, inexplicably, with only a few feet to go, Jasper’s nosedive suddenly halted and he was transformed into a shimmering vapour within a luminous cloud, from which a howling wind began to blow, whipping up dust and leaves from the ground below.

Mungo pulled the children to him. He wrapped his robe about them with one hand, while shielding his eyes from the blinding glare of the cloud with the other. Charlie the dog quickly got the message and scampered off whimpering behind the cottage, his tail firmly between his legs.

Suddenly, the sound of manic laughter echoed

through the glen, and within the ghostly cloud there materialised the face of a man, his long hair billowing wildly, his satanic green eyes more menacing than a snake's, his mouth contorted into an evil grin. He threw his head back and laughed again.

Mungo gaped at this awful apparition. 'Zorn!' he gulped, his voice thick with foreboding.

Susie and Jamie peeked out trembling from the folds of Mungo's robe.

Then, chillingly, Zorn's laughter ceased as abruptly as it had begun. 'So, Mungo the Great,' he snarled, his words sounding as though they were coming from within a vast cavern, 'you gave the game away, didn't you? After all this time, you couldn't resist the temptation to show off with one of your pathetic little tricks, could you? Yes,' Zorn rasped, 'you gave the game away, and now I've found you – at last!'

Mungo was unable to hide his loathing. 'You'll still rot in that foul hell hole,' he growled. 'You'll rot there with the rest of your kind – forever!'

Zorn's claw-like hand appeared beside his face, and from his fingers Jasper was dangling by the tail, struggling hopelessly, squealing in terror. 'If anyone is going to rot,' Zorn boomed, 'it is you, Mungo!' Then, smirking, he diverted his stare towards the wriggling mouse. 'There's not much of him, but lightly grilled with some rat livers ... hmm, and a nice bottle of Chianti...' Zorn smacked his lips, the sound of his manic laughter echoing out once more as he and his enveloping cloud disappeared in a puff of green smoke.

Mungo and the children were left standing in a

still, eerie silence.

Jamie was staring up at Mungo, his eyes moist with tears. ‘Can I have my mouse back now?’ he asked.

Mungo remained silent, but the look on his face suggested that he wasn’t sure the little boy’s request would be an easy one to satisfy.

‘Wh-who was that horrible man?’ Susie stuttered as she crept from the sanctuary of Mungo’s robe.

The old man slumped into his rocking chair, his expression grave. ‘That was Zorn. The Lord of Goblin Hall, he calls himself. Hmm, and Genghis Khan was a pussy cat compared to that evil guffbag.’

A puzzled frown wrinkled Susie’s brow. ‘Goblin Hall? You mean...?’

‘Yes, the old castle there. Goblin Ha’, as the locals hereabout refer to it.’ Mungo gestured across the glen towards the woods, where the crumbling remains of a large building were just visible through the trees.

‘But nobody lives there,’ Susie pooh-poohed. ‘It’s a dump. Only a heap of silly old stones.’

Mungo shook his head. ‘Ah, well, it may seem that way now, but –’

‘I’m going to get Jasper back,’ Jamie butted in, and made to head off towards the ruins.

Mungo stood up quickly and grabbed his arm. ‘No, boy! You must never go near that castle. Nor you,’ he went on, turning to Susie. ‘Not now. Not any more.’ He stared over the glen with a troubled look in his eyes. ‘That would only be playing into Zorn’s hands.’

‘But Jasper,’ Jamie protested. ‘I want Jasper back.’

Sighing, Mungo patted the little boy's shoulder. 'Don't fret, I'll get you another mouse.' Then, with a reassuring little chuckle, he added, 'Maybe one that does tricks, hmm?'

But Jamie was having none of it. 'No, I'm going to get Jasper!' he insisted, and prepared to head off again.

Once more, Mungo reached out and stopped him. 'Wait!' he said, his tone kindly but firm. Over the top of his spectacles, he looked at both children in turn, reading their expressions. He could see that they didn't understand, couldn't possibly understand, the danger they might now be in. 'Come,' he smiled, sitting back down on his rocking chair and beckoning the children to join him. 'I think I must tell you a story.'

Though Susie and Jamie knew it would be going against their mother's wishes, curiosity got the better of them. So, without further ado, they hunkered down cross-legged in front of Mungo's chair.

'Bet I've heard it before,' Susie grumped, not wishing to appear too interested.

Mungo turned a deaf ear and made himself comfortable. 'Now,' he began, 'this happened a long, long time ago – many centuries in the past, when I was but a lad, and when the castle of Goblin Hall was at its most magnificent – the grandest castle in the land, the home of the Master, the Great High Sorcerer himself...'

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