



Le Secret de Mhorag

The Secret of Mhorag

Martin Barry

Ils serpentent dans les profondeurs obscures des lochs écossais, ils hantent les vastes océans et glissent silencieusement sous les eaux paisibles des lacs sauvages d'Irlande. Qu'on les nomme serpents de mer ou monstres de lac, ces gigantesques et énigmatiques créatures provoquent frayeur et fascination. Ce sont pourtant de nobles entités dont le destin tragique et mystérieux se trouve intimement lié à celui des humains. Lorsque l'aventureux John Émile Talbot, douze ans, fait la connaissance de Ragdanor – un jeune monstre à la fois serpent de mer et créature lacustre –, il est loin de se douter qu'un monde nouveau s'ouvrira à lui, précipitant son existence au cœur d'une étrange aventure de guerre, d'amour, de trahison et de chasse aux monstres.



They glide about the obscure depths of Scottish lochs, haunt vast oceans and slip silently through the peaceful waters of Ireland's wilderness lakes. Called sea serpents or lake monsters, these gigantic and enigmatic creatures strike fear and fascination in our hearts. Yet they are noble entities, whose tragic and mysterious destiny is intimately tied to that of humans.

When 12-year-old adventurer John Emile Talbot meets Ragdanor, a young monster that is both sea serpent and lake-dwelling creature, he has no idea that a new world is about to open up. He is propelled into the heart of a strange adventure of war, love, treason and the hunt for monsters.

Le Secret de Mhorag est une série de trois romans *fantasy* qui voyage entre notre époque et le XIII^e siècle irlandais. En ces temps reculés, les actes téméraires d'un chevalier normand ont marqué le destin des monstres aquatiques et celui des humains pour les siècles à venir.

The Secret of Mhorag is a series of three fantasy novels that travel between the present and 13th-century Ireland. In the murky reaches of times past, the rash actions of a Norman knight mark the destiny of water monsters and humans for centuries to come.

Cette trilogie marque les débuts du *young adult* chez Groupe Librex.

This trilogy marks the debuts of Librex young adult fiction.

Une odysée grandiose avec des chevaliers normands et des monstres mystérieux qui peuplent les lacs irlandais et écossais

A grandiose odyssey with Norman knights and mysterious monsters gliding through the lakes of Ireland and Scotland

Un roman *fantasy* dans lequel les péripéties s'enchaînent à un rythme d'enfer et qui plaira autant aux adolescents qu'aux adultes de tous âges

A fantasy/adventure novel, where the various episodes are linked together at a furious pace, that both teenagers and adults will enjoy

Une fine et intelligente démonstration que l'homme demeure son pire ennemi avec son insatiable soif de pouvoir

An intelligent and fine demonstration of the fact that humans are their own worst enemies by their insatiable thirst for power and territorial expansion

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Young Adult – Fantasy



Bachelier ès arts, spécialisé en communication, **Martin Barry** est scénariste et réalisateur de plusieurs séries documentaires et de fiction et d'émissions jeunesse.

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Le Secret de Mhorag , tome 3

Into the Depths of the Forgotten Lake

The Secret of Mhorag, volume 3

Abstracts of volumes 2 and 3 available

Le passage interdit

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The Forbidden Passage

The Secret of Mhorag, Volume 1

Martin Barry

Tapi dans les profondeurs de son lac irlandais, un monstre lacustre du nom de Ragdanor attend le retour de Mhorag, sa mère. Celle-ci l'abandonne tous les sept ans pour s'aventurer par-delà les mers afin d'accomplir un pèlerinage secret. Mais elle doit affronter de terribles créatures qui la pourchassent sans relâche.

Pour sa part, Ragdanor ne se doute pas que ses cauchemars rejoignent par télépathie un Irlandais de douze ans : John Émile Talbot, surnommé Jet. Ce dernier n'en peut plus de rêver de monstres.

Par un matin brumeux, Jet fait la rencontre du jeune mastodonte sorti de son lac pour s'aventurer sur le sol. Avant de prendre la fuite, le garçon reconnaît la créature qu'il voit dans ses rêves récurrents. Le choc est énorme. Quel lien mystérieux les unit ? *Le passage interdit* est le premier tome de la trilogie *Le Secret de Mhorag*.

Hidden in the depths of an Irish lough, a lake monster named Ragdanor awaits the return of his mother, Mhorag.

Every seven years, Mhorag abandons Ragdanor to venture across the seas on a secret pilgrimage. Throughout her journey, she is chased relentlessly by terrible creatures.

Ragdanor has no idea that his nightmares are being telepathically transmitted to a 12-year-old Irish boy named John Emile Talbot, known as Jet. The boy is being driven to distraction by these dreams of monsters.

One foggy morning, Jet meets the young creature who has emerged from his lake and ventured out on land. He is about to run away when he recognizes the creature as the one in his recurring dreams. The shock is enormous. What mysterious link binds them together?

The Forbidden Passage is the first volume in the trilogy *The Secret of Mhorag*.

The Secret of Mhorag

Volume 1

The Forbidden Passage

Translation : Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood

For Rachelle, with whom I first saw
Doo Lough.

1.

IRELAND XIIIth century

William FitzWilliam donned the homespun robe that the young monk had just handed him. The rough brownish wool of the humble habit contrasted with the rich garments he had just removed. He would not wear these again before completing a whole month of prayer and penance. He noticed that the Augustinian monk who was taking care of his personal belongings was carefully disposing of his lozenge-patterned armour, of his magnificent dagger decorated with sparkling precious stones, but also and especially of the great battle axe he usually wore at his belt. They had rarely been apart. The weapon had served him well during many battles in the past. The priest

finished neatly folding a short sleeveless vest whose texture and appearance aroused his curiosity because the soft skin it was made of could change colour according to the variations of the ambient light. William watched from the corner of his eye until the priest put the vest down with the rest of his things. He then covered his balding head with the robe's large hood and adjusted the only piece of jewellery he ever wore at all times: a chain upon which hung a richly-ornamented little vial containing a reddish liquid.

When he exited the thatched-roof shelter on that June morning, William was surprised to see that the mist had completely evaporated. The rising sun was still spilling over the horizon, lighting a landscape whose stillness inspired prayerful reverence. William headed for the quay where his two sons awaited him, along with the family chaplain. The eldest boy, David, resembled his father. Stocky, wide in the shoulders, with piercing eyes, only his thickly curled head of hair differed from old William's bald one. The young man seemed much older than his thirty-two years. Indeed, the last few years had proved difficult for him. The FitzWilliams' ancestral lands were located in faraway Wales. David had inherited the estate when his father became involved in the conquest of Ireland. But the castle had recently come under attack by fierce Welsh warriors, and David was forced into exile.

The recent months had not been any easier for William himself. He had constantly had to deal with never-ending conflicts over land. Though still vigorous and quick-minded, William FitzWilliam no longer had the stomach for confrontation. He longed to end his days in the tranquility of his fortress in the Irish west country.

Aided by two of the Augustinians, William was the first to board the little boat bringing them to the Isle of Saints in the middle of the lake. The Lough Derg sanctuary was by far Ireland's best known pilgrimage site and one of Europe's most celebrated. William gazed toward the famous island and the religious building rising upon it. He smiled with admiration at the sight of its stone walls which, bathed by the rays of the rising sun, looked something like Heaven's embassy. He wanted to believe that a Christian pilgrimage comprising a month of prayers and fasting would help restore peace in his territories.

David sat beside his father. William so embodied what David would become that, clothed in identical habits, together they illustrated the passing of time. The monks then helped Garrett, William's younger son, to get into the boat. He was quite the opposite of the eldest. Slender and graceful, he was almost a head taller. Thin brown hair crowned a noble, determined-looking face. His large pale grey eyes – his mother's eyes – gave him an aura of mystery that seemed to point to a religious vocation. And yet his fate was not to be that of a monk's. Even though he had not inherited his father's powerful build, he was solid nonetheless and had proved in the past that a fearsome warrior could be awakened in him. Aged thirty-one, Garrett now shared the governance of their Irish castle with William. Sitting close by him was Cormac MacNamara, the FitzWilliam castle's chaplain. The churchman, aged forty-four, was doing a poor job of hiding his fear of water. His pale complexion and fine features highlighted large dark eyes not unlike those of a frightened rodent. Nothing escaped this holy man, who was analyzing everything around him.

Two monks, one at each end of the little boat, started paddling toward the Isle of Saints. The water's steady lapping against the paddles harmonized with the birds' songs. William could feel his faith strengthening. Suddenly, the craft began to slightly rise up from the surface, then stabilized again as if some inexplicable airwave had lifted it. The monks had stopped paddling and were exchanging anxious looks. As for chaplain Cormac, he was trying to remain calm though his bony fingers gripped the sides of the boat. The Augustinians resumed paddling but their body language spoke of deep-seated concern. Fitzwilliam and his sons tried to evaluate the distance still separating them from the monastery quay. Then an expression of dread froze the monks' faces as, once again, they scrutinized the surface of the lake. A dark mass of about ten metres long was rushing towards them. Terror turned William's blood to ice. The monks started paddling frantically but the oncoming monster shattered the boat and everything turned into a symphony of wood splintering, voices howling and water splashing. In a split second the six men aboard were thrown into the water.

When Garrett regained consciousness he spotted David thrashing about wildly, in search of a piece of wreckage to grab onto. Poor David did not know how to swim. Garrett moved in his brother's direction to help him and, at the same time, glimpsed William holding onto a piece of the hull. Garrett stopped suddenly. The monster swam by him at less than a metre away and glared at him with fire in his eyes before heading straight for his father. It grabbed William by the chest. The scene was unbearable. With its head out of the water and its prey clutched in its great jaw, the creature was flinging the knight like a dog playing with a worthless old rag. You could hear bones snapping. Blood spurted out of the old man's mouth, putting an end to his

cries of terror. Then the beast dragged its victim's broken body down into the depths of the lake where it had come from.

And so died William FitzWilliam, Norman knight, hero of the third Holy Crusade and lord of FitzWilliam castle.

Everything was silent for a moment, then the monks' cries and agitation rang out from one shore to the other. Garrett was the only son who survived. David drowned. The monks lived, as did Cormac MacNamara, whom David dragged to safety on the shore. A few hours later, William's mutilated body was found not far from the quay. Remains of his monk's habit still clung to it but the little vial that usually hung from his neck had disappeared. The reasons that had driven the Lough Derg monster to make such an attack upon a human were a mystery that the Welshman FitzWilliam, knight and lord, would take to his grave.

Chaplain Cormac quickly recovered from the shock. In the days following the monster's attack, Garrett fell into a worrisome silence. His face showed neither fear nor anger nor despair, nor did he weep with grief. The tragedy that had occurred in the waters of Lough Derg in the month of June in the Year of Our Lord 1216, and which he had witnessed in an intense and personal manner, would map out an unimaginable fate for him.

For centuries to come, his descendants' fates, as well as the future of aquatic water monsters all over the northern hemisphere, would be deeply disturbed.

2.

The young lake monster did not dare blink. Even though he was staring fixedly at the two giant silhouettes tangled up in a frantic ballet, he could no longer distinguish his mother's outline. The opponents disappeared inside the cloud of sludge stirred up by the disturbances of the struggle. Only his long whiskers allowed him to perceive the brutal wavelengths of this confrontation in the dark depths of a Scottish lake. Hiding in the tall weeds, he forced himself to stay still so as to merge with the muddy bottom. But very soon now he would have to swim to the surface to take in the oxygen he was beginning to cruelly lack. "I must stay calm. Especially not attract attention. She will win. She will win, and then she will come and get me and we will swim up for air together", he kept telling himself with forced optimism. Until today he had never seen the two enormous lake monsters who had appeared in the loch to attack his mother. "Where did they come from? Why are they attacking us?"

A cluster of little air bubbles escaped from his nostrils and rose toward the light of day. Panicky, he looked around to make sure the bubbles had not been noticed. Sensing a presence, he turned suddenly to face a third creature furtively gliding toward him. Fear froze his blood. The impressive beast charged straight at its prey in a snake-like movement that revealed its mutilated right eye. The young monster shrank back then leapt upwards. Driven by despair, he activated his lateral fins so as to reach the surface of the loch as fast as possible, a distance that seemed as far as the

sky. His attacker's jaws were already grazing his hindquarters when suddenly the lake water turned bloody, filtering red into the sunrays stabbing the water. When he took the risk of glancing behind him, he saw the profile of a majestic sea serpent grabbing his attacker.

“John!”

Mr Quinn's voice tore the boy from his sleep. Opening his eyes, John Émile Talbot let out a fearful little scream, provoking laughter from the other students in the class. Stunned, he already dreaded his teacher's remarks and the usual deluge of teasing that would follow. Once again he had fallen asleep during history class and, once again, he had had the same mysterious dream. The depths of the Scottish lake, the terrible confrontation, the lack of oxygen, the sinister monster's attack and the giant sea serpent's intervention had not yet left his thoughts.

Mr Quinn demanded silence, then turned his attention back to John.

- Are you alright?

The eleven-year old nodded that he was.

- May I go to the toilet, sir? he asked, hesitant.

His teacher granted silent permission.

Avoiding the other students' eyes, John rushed out of the classroom, as though he were attempting to escape the wave of whispers forming behind his back.

He dashed across the empty hallway and ran into the bathroom. He stopped short when he saw his reflection in the mirror. The dream's impact was visible on his features like the aftereffect of a gust of wind that refused to fade. The same strange nightmare had haunted his sleep for almost a year.

His chronic insomnia had become his parents' main source of concern. Whenever his tiredness finally prevailed, he would once again see himself in the guise of a young water monster.

He splashed water on his face to freshen his spirits, hoping to chase away the dream's leftover images. "Be brave, Little John!" he reminded himself, using the encouraging words his father Philippe occasionally spoke to him. He nicknamed him "Little John" to evoke Robin Hood's companion, but also in honour of his maternal grandfather, John FitzWilliam.

A native Francophone Montrealer, Philippe Talbot had adopted Ireland, homeland of his distant ancestors, some twenty years ago. Although he had acquired the country's language, accent and lifestyle – he had even married an Irish girl –, he insisted that his son know the basics of French.

But Little John's friends preferred to call him "Jet", first because they joked that this scrawny kid with the skinny legs could run as fast as a jet plane. But also and especially because the word JET was an acronym of his full name: John Émile Talbot.

Resigned to going back to the classroom, Jet looked at himself in the mirror again. "Hopeless!" he muttered. He could still feel the turbulence of the Scottish loch.

3.

As soon as he opened his eyes, Ragdanor recognized the familiar surroundings of his peaceful Irish lake. The young monster was no longer in the waters of Great Deep Lake, thus named by lake monsters. He was no

longer in the northern part of the Great Isle, known by humans as Scotland. In a dreamlike state he had once again relived the frightful attack that had taken place one hundred and sixty-eight years ago. Thanks to the help of a mysterious sea serpent, his mother had succeeded in chasing away his assailants. Afterwards, they had left their Scottish lake to undertake a series of long and perilous voyages. He vaguely remembered the endless distances he had covered through dark tunnels, often clinging to his mother, who strained to swim always faster.

But that was such a long time ago. Now they lived in peace in the watery refuge of Ireland, which monsters called the Green Isle.

He poked his nose out of his underwater shelter, which was built of an arrangement of tree trunks artfully created by his mother at the bottom of the northwest part of the lake. Like most lake monster refuges, the place provided a sense of security more so than actual protection. Glancing upward, Ragdanor noted that the setting sun had started drawing shadows on the surface. A few trout, with their mocking eyes, appeared by his side, aware that the young giant was no threat to them. Ragdanor extracted himself fully from his lair and did a few breast strokes before stopping. The strange serenity of the place betrayed something unusual. Everything was quiet. Everything was much too quiet. Even the trout found the deep tranquility a trifle suspect. Ragdanor started swimming at top speed, producing a wake that propelled the fish in all directions. He covered several metres then suddenly stopped again. No need to explore the vast submarine territory any further, he knew it well. His telepathic faculties were not picking up the slightest thought from Mhorag, his mother. He understood

that, once again, she had gone somewhere and that he was alone in the depths of Dark Hills Lake. That was how Ragdanor and Mhorag had named this magnificent expanse of smooth open water surrounded by steep craggy mountains. The abrupt elevations encircling the lough were impressive in their grandeur, yet they gave off a strange sense of concealing obscure secrets. Humans called this lake “Doo Lough”, which in Irish simply meant dark, or black, lake.

Every seven years, Mhorag would leave the lough for several months. She usually slipped away secretly, while her offspring slept, thus avoiding a painful separation. In any case, she knew that Ragdanor was out of danger. Even though he hated to see her venture out alone into the wide world, he was resigned to the idea that she was accomplishing some mysterious duty. And in any case, he was old enough now to feed himself, and clever enough to avoid being seen by humans.

But there had been an exception. Twenty-one years earlier, a woman in her forties, with tired features and pale skin, would take solitary walks on the shore every day. Ragdanor had watched her. He had detected her profound sadness. One day she spotted the young monster and, contrary to all expectations, succeeded in attracting him with a few bits of bread. He much preferred this food to the algae and plankton that made up his regular diet. That year Mhorag had again been absent for over three months. Therefore she was not present to forbid him to accept the benefactress’ offerings. But nobody except the woman with the pale complexion had seen him. After a few weeks, the visits and bread treats suddenly stopped.

Now older and becoming an adult, Ragdanor was not dealing as well with Mhorag's recurring flights as he had before. "Where does she go and why doesn't she take me with her?" he wondered. One hundred and nineteen years had gone by since she had made her first journey, and he had always respected her formal ban to leave the lake. In fact, he had never felt like leaving it. Recently, however, he had been thinking that he could accompany Mhorag in her future travels in order to come to her rescue in case of danger. In addition, he felt an unexplainable yet growing desire: to venture onto solid ground. He could not understand where this temptation was coming from. To his knowledge, his mother had never dared to leave the lough in order to idle in the tall weeds. True, she had often told him the legend of Dochvol the Bold, famous for his expeditions on land. But that exceptional water monster belonged to a faraway past. Nevertheless, nothing in the world presently attracted the young monster more than an excursion upon moist land.

"Why am I so different?" he constantly asked himself. The question was quite justified. His mother had the typical appearance of a lake monster, with her long neck, powerful stomach, three dorsal humps and lateral swimfins. She looked a little like a giant seal who had inherited the neck of a dinosaur. Contrary to Mhorag, whose head was hairless, Ragdanor had a mane. This feature was completely normal for a male lake monster. But his body had a more serpent-like shape than his mother's and, in addition, magnificent dorsal fins lined his back all the way to his long tail, a feature not usually present in lake monsters. "Does this mean that my father was a sea serpent?", he wanted to know. He had never met a sea serpent during the course of his short life, but he did remember that a member of that species

was constantly breaking into his nightmare. Elongated body, long tail, dorsal fins, Ragdanor did indeed have the physical attributes of giant sea creatures.

Lake monsters and sea serpents share the same marine mammal ancestry. But the former evolved mostly in fresh water and the latter in salt water, which is why their physical appearances differ considerably. ¹

1. The term 'sea serpent' can sometimes cause confusion because it includes the word 'serpent', suggesting that the creature belongs to the reptile family. But these giants do belong to the mammal species.
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Even though Ragdanor often questioned his origins, he never had any doubts about his close ties with Mhorag. They had identical large green eyes and their dark skin was streaked with turquoise.

Ragdanor swam back up to the surface. Only his eyes and nostrils emerged from the water, allowing him to fill up with oxygen. Intending to examine the mountain landscape further, he stretched his neck. At the age of two hundred and twenty-four, he had not yet reached his full size and measured only twelve metres from head to tail. As he scanned the steep cliffs surrounding the lake, he considered venturing onto solid ground. All of a sudden he saw a flight of rooks circling the mountain to the west of the lake; the birds landed on the shore like a black veil slowly falling onto the grass. Ragdanor was suspicious of birds. Mhorag had passed this fear on to her son by telling him many times how treacherous feathered creatures had betrayed their presence in Great Deep Lake, causing the infamous attack he still dreamed about. At that very moment his whiskers picked up the vibrations

of an oncoming car. There was no need for alarm, because the vehicle was still several kilometres away, but Ragdanor momentarily set aside his project of exploring land. He dove back down, creating little ripples that blurred the clouds' reflection on the surface.

12.

IRELAND

XIIIth century

Garrett was toying with the idea of fleeing his lands for ever. Gazing at the castle's inner court, he imagined himself navigating the stormy waters of the Atlantic toward the mysterious lost continent explored by Saint Brendan ages ago, according to the Irish legends he had been told.

Cormac MacNamara approached discreetly.

- Beware of falling into despair, sir Garrett.

Garrett turned round abruptly.

- I didn't realize you were there, father.
- I am always by your side, master Garrett. Especially these days, when your soul seems very troubled.
- Your prayers are slow to take effect, father.
- Prayers sometimes need reinforcement. In such cases, only action can be beneficial.
- And what action do you recommend?
- A very special action, but one that you must understand clearly.
- Speak, father Cormac.

- Sir Garrett, you will need to consider those nighttime visions that constantly assail you as a pressing sign from Divine Providence.
- Divine Providence? That hideous monster swimming in my father's blood?
- Heavenly voices sometimes choose rather unusual ways of reminding us of our destiny.
- Is that your advice? The paths of my destiny seem hidden in a fog that will never lift. I am exhausted. The creature should have taken me down with him to the bottom of the lake, instead of killing me slowly by poisoning my nights with these terrifying dreams. I have become a mere shadow of the man I was before my father's death. Only the presence of Derdriu and of my son brings me some relief and hope. And now the enemy is preparing to attack. Cathal O'Corrigan has timed things perfectly.
- Your true enemy does not belong to the race of humans. He sleeps in his lair in Lough Derg. I deeply believe that the dreams this monster is inducing in you will, in the end, allow you to find your way.
- What do you mean by all this, chaplain?
- Follow me.

Garrett followed the churchman as he climbed the steep stairs connecting the chapel to his work chamber.

A simple desk with writing materials neatly laid out on it dominated the room amid a chaos of books, parchment rolls and maps. Cormac removed a heavy pile of documents from an old wooden chest banded with metal, then

seized a key and lifted its lid. From the box he carefully extracted a large stone wrapped in a timeworn cloth. Then, as the knight watched with a puzzled expression, Cormac uncovered a crystal the size of a potato and resembling a huge diamond. The translucent stone's multiple facets showed not a single flaw. The chaplain put the crystal up to the light. Immediately, rainbow rays flew across the wall, the ceiling and the floor. The reflections transformed the chamber into an eerie-feeling refuge. A slight buzzing sound emitted by the crystal seemed to rise from the centre of the Earth.

- Nowhere else in the world will you find such a treasure, sir Garrett!

Dazzled, Garrett was watching with his large grey eyes. Cormac deposited the object on the table with great care and immediately covered it up again.

- What is this strange stone?

- *Anguinam*.

Cormac's rodent eyes briefly met Garrett's before he spoke again.

- *Anguinam* is the Latin name a good many of my predecessors gave this crystal with its exceptional powers. "Druid's Egg" would be the closest translation of the term. It was handed to me by a friend of your father's, the clergyman Gerald of Cambria. Master Gerald had made himself my protector, many years previously. He was a man of great generosity. Among other things, he passed on to me his knowledge of the secret sciences such as they were once taught by the Druids of Ireland and Wales.

- How did the Druids use this crystal?

- Some old-time pagans believed it possessed protective powers that preserved them from death during battles, while others believed it could be used to foretell the future.
- Is that your intention, father Cormac?
- No. This crystal has nothing in common with the Druids' amulets. It is unique.

Cormac quietly motioned for Garrett to sit on a plain wooden bench. The knight did so as the priest drew a thick curtain across the only window. He lit a candle and sat down next to the knight.

- After searching for many years, Gerald of Cambria found this crystal among the remains of a monastery that had been destroyed by fire, at some distance from here, in the southern part of the island. Then he remembered the description an old Druid had entrusted him with before dying. In Gerald's mind, this object had to be the Lough Gill stone.
- The Lough Gill stone? I have heard of that lake in the north of the island, though I had no idea such minerals could be found there.
- These minerals are buried somewhere deep in the earth and no one can access them. My own investigations led me to the four corners of the kingdom of Ireland, sir Garrett. I spent more than eleven years collecting all the legends and consulting all the documents pertaining to lake creatures. There is not a monastery, or a priory, or the high place of any Irish chieftain that I have not searched through. Among the countless documents I was able to decode, many referred to a curious event that occurred in ancient times. Fearless men, warriors from the north of the island, apparently discovered a huge

underground cave whose walls were coated with this crystal.

Numerous poems or legends mention a chamber of light or a temple built of sparkling stones. In the middle of the cave there was a very deep pond allowing the Lough Gill monster and others of the same species to reach this enigmatic place.

- What were they doing there?
- I have no idea. As far as I am aware, nobody has yet been able to solve this mystery.
- And the men cut this piece of crystal from one of the walls?
- Quite likely. Fascinated by its beauty, or wanting to use it to make weapons, they persevered until they were able to remove this tiny fragment.
- I still don't see how this piece of crystal from the dark ages can be of any help to me.

Cormac got up and paced around his study chamber, lightly running his hands over the many books accumulated during his years of apprenticeship and research.

- Lake monsters are cunning and aggressive. Some say they are able to speak the language of humans. They break into our dreams, poison the existence of noble lords such as yourself, even terrify defenseless young children. They communicate among themselves. They are insidious, and their domain extends all the way to the oceans where their treacherous cousins, sea serpents, rule, and destroy ships as well.

Cormac picked up the crystal still in its wrapping. He uncovered it once again and the object reflected the faint light of the candle flame.

- Yet despite all their cleverness, when you plunge this crystal into the waters of a lake after exposing it to the light of day for a few moments, lake creatures are irresistibly attracted to its glow. Fascinated, they rush toward this source of light without a pause.
- Like bait, murmured Garrett.
- The most efficient one there is. My master, Gerald of Cambria, used it to attract the cruel beast living in Lake Llangorse, which your noble father then killed in a merciless duel.

Cormac wrapped up the crystal and handed it to the knight.

- Today this ancestral stone crosses your life's path, sir Garrett. Go! Go, avenge the honour of your father and of your brother David who died with him. Use the crystal, attract the monster, attract them all. Rid the kingdom of these diabolical beasts who are torturing your soul. And then, with their rough hides, we will fashion outer garments that will protect your men from injury for generations to come. Remember that your father wore an armour made from the skins of what he had captured during his legendary hunt and that he was never wounded, even during the dreadful battles outside Jerusalem.
- I inherited that vest with its phenomenal powers, but I've never dared to wear it.
- Dare to wear it now, sir! Surround yourself with worthy warriors. Prepare your nets. Sharpen your lance, sharpen your dagger. Freedom will be won by exterminating the evil circulating in the bowels of our earth. The peace and prosperity dreamed of by your father and by your enemy's father will be restored one hundred times over.

13.

The storm raged all night. Pushed by gusts of wind, thick curtains of rain blew over the ocean before smashing onto the cliffs of the north of Ireland. In the middle of the ocean, at approximately eighty metres from the coast of County Mayo, stood a large rock pillar. Once part of the island, this natural column, inaccessible to humans, was now home to many bird species. But on this night of gale-force turmoil, the imposing stone column was completely deserted. Not a single winged creature dared to try clinging to its rocky sides to listen to the waves crashing and the wind howling.

Mhorag raised her head out of the water and breathed in. Stretching her neck to keep her nose above the surface, through powerful nostrils she exhaled the air accumulated in her lungs. Like all lake monsters, she had the ability to survive in salt water but always found the experience unpleasant. Although she had so far travelled only one tenth of the distance to her destination, she already felt tired. Her eyes, reddened by the salty liquid, scanned the horizon looking for the outline of a familiar landmark. In the darkness of this night of high winds, huge waves and torrential rains, it was difficult to see anything at all. In the middle of this vast ocean, Mhorag's equine head drifting along on the swirling waters appeared very small indeed. There was nothing to indicate that this creature measured almost fifteen metres long from head to tail. All of a sudden, a glimmer of hope lit up her gaze. She had just spotted a rocky pillar less than a hundred metres away. Despite the storm, she had not lost her way. Now she must swim toward the cliffs rising opposite the stone column to reach the base of a promontory where erosion had scooped out a natural cave. There she would be able to rest in peace for

a few hours. She dove deeply enough to avoid the heaving waves and sped toward her refuge.

Ω

A hazy sun cast its yellowish light onto the heavy doors that were presently opening. She felt as if she was gliding into a grey stone building where masses of candles stretched their bright flames up through the darkness. Human silhouettes could be seen on both sides of the central aisle as she moved closer to a tall slender figure. The oak doors closed shut behind her.

Mhorag opened her eyes. She was treading water in the middle of the cave. Not a year went by without that strange dream emerging from deep inside her soul. She knew perfectly well where it came from but preferred to chase those images from her mind. Bobbled about by the little waves rhythmically resonating against the rocky walls, she was looking at the storm. “Should I turn back?” she wondered, disheartened at the idea of facing the raging sea again. The narrow cave, about fifty metres long and open at both ends, did not provide entire protection, but it did offer a bit of respite, especially when the elements were so unleashed.

Suddenly she sensed that the water, even though it was already cold, was being stirred by an icy current that made her feel restless. Outside, she thought she caught sight of a large dark shape darting under the surface at less than ten metres from the cave’s northern mouth. Her whiskers were unable to adequately pick up vibrations when the wind was blowing with such intensity. Her gaze swept the inside of her shelter. Nothing. Yet her

strong intuition kept shouting at her that something abnormal was happening below the churning waters.

She quickly swam toward the southern exit. At that very moment another lake monster came up into the cave, and was less than one metre in front of her. This brutal manner of entering another creature's space left no doubt as to the animal's intentions: attack. The imposing male with a sparse mane was examining her while glancing left and right to make sure his prey was alone inside the cave. "Vangor!" cried Mhorag. Their eyes met briefly, then the intruder lunged at her neck with his mighty jaws. Barely escaping being bitten, she tried to intimidate her aggressor by charging head first into his side. He drew back several metres so as to attack her a second time. A fierce confrontation ensued, producing an unbelievably violent tumult in the water. Vangor struck her a head blow to the stomach. Mhorag's body twisted in pain, but just as the deadly monster was preparing to grab her again, she was able to seize his lower jawbone in her jaws. Summoning up all her strength, she held this lock for several seconds. Frantically thrashing about, Vangor was able to fling Mhorag a few metres away, thus freeing himself from her grip. She immediately rushed out of the cave to immerse herself in the obscurity of the wildly tossing sea.

Mhorag swam underwater at top speed, convinced her adversary was still relentlessly chasing her. She took the risk of glancing behind her. As she feared, the sinister assailant was hunting her down. But after a brief moment he stopped to go back up to the surface, as if he was giving up the chase. Mhorag did the same. Bobbing up and down in the waves, doused by the wind-swept rain, she looked from afar at the lake monster with the sparse mane who was staring at her with a triumphant expression. Once again

Mhorag felt the sea water getting colder. She felt herself being roughly dragged down to the depths. As she vigorously struggled, she saw a cloud of blood billowing from her rear fins. An unexplainable force was jerking her down toward the bottom like a common piece of bait. Despair overcame her when she saw the razor-toothed mouth of an enormous tylosaurus biting into her. A horrible pain spread through her rear fins, but all at once she remembered the only thing she could do to hope to get out of the situation: nothing. So she pretended to be dead, and allowed herself to be dragged along without resisting for quite a while. The reptilian realized that she had stopped struggling and that the hunting game was over. So he opened wide his jagged-edged jaw in order to get a firmer grip on Mhorag's hindquarters. She, in turn, made the most of this split second to twist over on herself and launched into a series of high-speed erratic movements in order to escape death. The tylosaurus tried to grip her between his jaws again but Mhorag's unpredictable water ballet was confusing him. She performed one last maneuver that allowed her to swim underneath the tylosaurus' belly, then rushed to the surface for air. She had never faced such a foe.

These sea crocodiles topped with four swim-fins and measuring almost twenty metres rarely ventured into the northern seas. But in recent years some of them had established ties with treacherous lake monsters who acted as their guides through the underwater tunnels. The tylosaurus belonged to a group of giant reptiles that humans believed extinct since the prehistoric era known as the Cretaceous period. But a small community of these voracious predators had survived over the ages.

Trying to ignore the pain in her back fin, Mhorag filled her lungs with air and immediately dove back down. Too fast for her, the tylosaurus soon caught up with her. Nonetheless, she managed to skillfully dodge a second series of painful bites and regained the surface once more, as did the reptile, who was just about to deal her the fatal blow. Just then she heard a voice descending through the air.

- Get out of here, you big brute!

“Bygone”, thought Mhorag.

The aging chough could only fly with difficulty because of the stormy conditions and was trying to distract the merciless reptile, who paid him no attention whatsoever. Mhorag decided to make a half-turn and look death in the face. At that very moment, Bygone landed on the tylosaurus’ left eye and began stabbing it with his long flame-red beak.

- Take this! And this! he screeched while attacking with the energy born of desperation.

The reptile was forced to shake his head to get rid of the bird, but the old seabird kept on stabbing the giant’s eye while gripping onto the scaly leather of his skin.

- Swim for your life, Mhorag! Get out of here!

Mhorag dove as fast as she could, without worrying about the direction she was swimming in. No matter, she absolutely had to escape the monster. But the temptation to know what had happened to the brave old chough took over. She briefly re-surfaced and in the distance spotted the tylosaurus shaking the poor creature’s inanimate body between its teeth. Here and there, dripping wet feathers were falling off his bloodied wings into the roiling sea. His neck was as limp as a rag. Thus died the noble Tharvorax, better known as Bygone, worthy red-billed chough, great

explorer of the southern seas and guardian of Horn Head. He had no descendants.

Mhorag felt like howling out her sadness, her rage and her fear. Never again would she encounter the valorous biped, friend of lake monsters, who, from the top of his sea cliff, had proudly watched over travellers.

The reptile finished swallowing his prey. His evil gaze pierced the storm and crossed Mhorag's. His ice-blue eyes paralyzed her with fear. Instantly she flashed on Ragdanor, alone in the waters of Doo Lough. What would become of him if she never returned? The chase started up again. Mhorag had perhaps gained a bit of advantage on her assailants but knew full well that both Vangor and the tylosaurus would soon catch up with her. Even while going as fast as possible, the thought of stopping, turning back and facing her enemies until they devoured her crossed her mind. "What good is fleeing?" she wondered. But Providence had decided otherwise. A deep vibration that seemed to bypass the storm now ruffled her whiskers. Emerging from the shadowy light was a massive eastbound freighter heavily cutting through the waves. Mhorag did not hesitate a single second: she dove down and swam to the ship's bottom. Hugging her back firmly against the vessel's metal body, she let the giant pull her along. Vangor and his reptilian partner tried to follow but lost sight of her in the seething foam and turbulence created by the huge rust-eaten cargo ship.

The ferocious tylosaurus set his ice-cold stare on the young lake monster and took off in his direction.

This frightening image hastened the end of Ragdanor's nightmare. He woke up with a jolt at the bottom of his lake. It was still night-time and the rain was relentlessly hammering the surface of the Irish lough. Ragdanor kept still for several seconds. His large green eyes darted apprehensively into every recess of his underwater domain. He finally understood that the giant reptile had not penetrated his expanse of water and that the bad dream was not his. It was a telepathic vision that he had quite inadvertently picked up. Mhorag was in danger. He knew it. There was no doubt in his mind. Even worse, he knew he couldn't do anything about it. He went up to the surface for air. Before emerging from the deep he closed his eyes and let his head slowly rise above the water. Hoping to spot his mother's benevolent silhouette drifting close to the shore, he lifted his eyelids. Nothing. Only a thick veil of rain smudging the view in shades of grey.

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