

Chapter 1

Grampa

"Seventeen again," grumbled Grampa MacBear. "And still in the same places!"

He was standing at the window of his room at the top of the tower of the Den and counting the islands in the loch. The morning sun was glittering on the surface of the loch. Dolphins and seals were dancing in the sunlight. But Grampa MacBear's day was already spoiled because, yet again, there were only seventeen islands.

"Drat!" he said. "Drat and jiggeration!"

He counted the islands every morning. It was always the first thing he did after getting out of bed. Nowadays his legs were usually rather stiff in the mornings. But it was only a few steps to the window, and from there he looked out over the whole of Bearloch.

He could see the village nestling by the shore of the loch over to the left. To the right he could just see Blair Bear with its turrets rising above the pine trees. Ahead he looked across the whole length of the loch to where it opened into the ocean beyond. But what really interested him were the islands.

He could not be sure there would always be the same number. He could be even less sure they would be in the same places. For in this loch the islands move.

The very small islands, the skerries, are especially prone to move. They move under cover of darkness and have never been seen moving, except by the birds and the sea creatures that live around them. But, in the morning, there they are - not where they were the day before, but somewhere else. Mostly it is the small islands that move. They are still young and fidgety.

The larger islands are more settled and seldom move. But even the large islands near the mouth of the loch will move sometimes. When a boat from the outside world approaches, they move closer together to hide the entrance to the loch.

For this is a secret loch, and even the islands want to keep it secret. It is a very long time since any boat from the outside world has found its way into Bearloch. Bearloch is one of the remotest parts of the forgotten lands of the north.

It was quite some time now since Grampa had noticed any of the islands move. "Nothing happens," he sighed. "Every morning, everything is just the same, drat it! It's boring me stiff. Every morning my legs feel stiffer. Soon I shall be terminally bored."

This did not stop him going down to the kitchen to join the family for breakfast as usual. First he pulled on his yellow tartan trews. (As he got older and felt the cold more, he preferred trousers to a kilt.) Then he put on an old white grandad shirt. He did not wear shoes because they would have hindered climbing.

Grampa had to climb down to breakfast. The round tower of the Den, as his family's house was called, rose three storeys above the flat roof of the rest of the house. There was no staircase in the tower. Instead there was a pole. Brown bears are used to climbing trees and when they move into houses they do not need staircases. The pole in the MacBears' house had short branches at irregular intervals, like a tree. Even Grampa MacBear, who used a stick when he went out walking, still clambered up and down the pole quite easily.

Grampa shared the house with his daughter-in-law Mother MacBear and her four bears: Duff, Beth, Tosh and Baby Brother. (In Bearloch bear cubs are known as bearns.) Baby Brother must have had a name, but no one ever used it. Father MacBear had left home soon after Baby Brother's birth and had never been seen in Bearloch since. The family missed him, but managed surprisingly well without him.

People said that Father MacBear and his friend Grizzly were just like the most restless and inquisitive of the skerries in the loch. One morning they simply left their homes and set off in the MacBear family's fishing boat. No one knew why. They just sailed out of the loch and never returned.

As a result only eight bears still lived in Bearloch. The MacBear family were six of these. Once bears lived in all the ancient forests that covered the northern lands. But now few of the forests survive and even fewer bears. Bearloch is one of their last habitats.

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"Nothing ever happens nowadays," said Grampa, banging his paw on the kitchen table. Baby Brother thought this a splendid idea and started banging both his paws on the table.

"I need something to happen. Jiggeration!" Grampa looked grumpily around at the family.

Mother MacBear, who was at the stove making Grampa's porridge, was concerned. It looked as though Grampa was about to throw one his temper tantrums. In moods like this he could be just as childish and difficult as Baby Brother.

Mother MacBear herself loved the quiet routine of life. The bearns made quite enough things happen for her liking. House guests were the one sort of distraction she really welcomed, but there were none of those just now.

"Well," she said to Grampa, "would you like something special for breakfast? I could put some honey on your porridge. Or you could have a honey pancake instead of a sea-weed one today."

"Honey is just what we always have when we want something special," said Grampa. "And that's very often. It's nothing unusual."

This was perfectly true. The MacBears had a special honey pantry which was always well stocked with big jars of heather honey and any excuse was enough to get one out. Baby Brother's first spoken word had been "unny." There was nothing unusual about honey in the MacBears' house, but it was very unusual for a MacBear to complain about this.

"Unny, unny, unny," said Baby Brother. He had suddenly grasped what the conversation was about.

"Grampa," said Beth, "you could pretend you only counted sixteen islands. Then you could take the boat out and go looking for the lost one." Beth had great faith in the power of imagination. "That could be a really exciting game," she added in her most helpful voice.

"I'm too old for games," muttered Grampa.

Then Tosh had a flash of inspiration. "A kelpie! That's it! You need to meet a kelpie. You must be very rude to it and it will take you by the scruff of the neck and drag you down into the loch and the next morning we shall find just your false teeth floating in the water. That will be the most exciting thing that's ever happened to us!"

Tosh had a gruesome imagination, but they all knew about kelpies. Kelpies are scary monsters who live in lochs. When they come out onto the land they usually look much like horses. This is why people also call them water-horses.

Duff, being the eldest of the bears, sometimes felt he ought to fill his lost father's place. It made him feel responsible for the family. In this mood he would make a big effort to be sensible about things, something that didn't come easily to most MacBears, young or old.

"Tosh, you gowk, stop blethering," he said. "You're letting your imagination run away with you - or rather, with Grampa."

"Now, Grampa, I know what you should do. You should go and see Mr Wompy. He's bound to be able to make something happen. Mr Wompy knows all about things happening."

This was right. Wompy was the local story-teller. He was also Grampa MacBear's oldest friend. Everyone agreed that Duff's suggestion was spot on.

And in any case the bears all loved visiting Wompy. He told them fabulous stories about chieftains and battles, brownies and banshees and blue men, and the bishbirds who live on distant islands in the sea that no one has visited for centuries.

In the MacBears' home breakfast was never hurried, but as soon as they had finished their porridge and pancakes Grampa and all four bears set out for Wompy's house.

"I think," said Beth, "that if we all really want something exciting to happen, it will."

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In front of the Den was a row of larch trees, planted there to protect the house from the wild winter weather. The path from the front door of the Den led through a gap in the trees and down towards the loch.

Grampa paused at the gap. He put a paw on Tosh's shoulder to stop him rushing forward. "Look, there's a horse," he said to the others.

The horse was standing where the path to Wompy's house branched off to the left. It was looking away from them towards the loch.

"So? - there's a horse," said Duff, puzzled for a moment. But soon, like the others, he recalled the conversation at breakfast and thought: "kelpie!"

Tosh's eyes lit up. "It must be," he said. "We hardly ever see real horses round here."

"Now let me deal with this," said Duff, in his responsible voice. "It may not be a kelpie, but we must be very careful. Kelpies aren't always nasty. Sometimes, if they take a liking to you, they'll do you favours. But they're highly unpredictable."

Beth knew about kelpies too: "What they really like is to get you to ride them. Then they take you down to the bottom of the loch and eat you."

"Aye," said Duff, "but you also have to be very careful not to offend them. If they think you're being rude they'll drag you off to their lair in the loch."

"They don't eat all of your body at once," said Tosh, grinning. "They eat the best bits while you're still alive, and keep the rest for leftovers the next day."

"We just need to act normally, not show we're afraid, and be very polite," said Duff. "Follow me!"

With Duff striding ahead they walked down the path. As they got near the horse, it turned to look, throwing its head back. They saw its big staring eyes looking down its nose at them.

Duff knew he must look the horse steadily in the eyes and say something respectful. He opened his mouth. But the horse's eyes had locked onto his, and he felt transfixed, unable to move or to speak. It was like those moments in dreams when you open your mouth to scream but you seem to have no voice. Usually you wake up at that point, but of course Duff didn't. He just stood there gawping. He was terrified this must look very rude to the horse.

"How do you do, sir? What a beautiful morning!" said Grampa, putting his paw on Duff's back and pushing him on.

Beth said: "Welcome to Bearloch! It's a great honour to have you here."

"Hi, I'm Tosh, and I think you're really terrific!"

Baby Brother waved his paw at the horse and burred "Geegee!"

The horse just went on staring at them as they turned down the path to Wompy's house. None of them dared look back for fear it would think that rude.

"Did you notice its ears?" asked Beth. "A kelpie disguised as a horse is supposed to have smaller ears than real horses' ears."

But they had all been too scared to look hard at the horse's ears.

"What about the neck? Kelpies have longer necks than real horses," said Grampa.

"Well, it could be a kelpie, but then again it might not," was all Beth could say.

"It was the eyes that were really strange," said Tosh.

"Hypnotic," mumbled Duff.

"Well, hypnotic eyes don't make a kelpie, not as far as I've ever heard," said Grampa.

"So nothing's really happened *yet*," said Tosh. It was disappointing to think the horse might not have been a kelpie at all, but they were still quite chuffed to have got past it safely. All except Duff, who felt a miserable failure.