

## Minexmagicorland

If the small boy's bottom lip had protruded further he would have tripped over it. He wanted to be indoors, playing a computer game, not here, plodding along the seafront with Alex. Approaching the quayside, Alex scooped him up and perched him on the harbour wall, steadying him with a protective arm around his waist.

"You and me, Tim," he whispered, "we'll have a real adventure."

Tim turned. "What? Here?"

Alex tightened his grip. "Shut your eyes. Listen." The blue-green dappled tide heaved wave after wave on the shore. "Hear that? That's Briscanica the shapeshifter and she's in a mood today. Listen to her panting and hissing because she can't reach us. Hear that rattling? It's the old bones she's ground smooth, licked and spat out on the shore. Open your eyes now. Look, she's turned tail. She's defeated. But she came close. See those?" He pointed to the yellow crusts of lichen on the rocks. "They're her footprints and she's left those slimy black strips of weed she didn't fancy - a bit like you and your broccoli!"

Tim giggled.

"But we're going over there." Alex pointed to North Hill rising steep and mysterious in its olive, emerald and black tartan of trees. "But we'll have to be stealthy. You game?"

Tim put his finger to his lips in silent conspiratorial agreement.

"Good lad."

The squeals and music from the fairground could no longer be heard. Tim's pulse raced. Ahead, squirrels scurried away into hiding.

"The guards have spotted us. We're surrounded. Be brave. We're in their territory."

Tim nodded, heart pounding, scarcely daring to breathe. A portly blackbird, busy like a butler, rustled in the undergrowth. A twig snapped, loud as a gunshot. Both froze. False alarm. The cavernous gloom remained eerily still. Wrinkled eyes in scaly trees observed but did not hinder their passage. Suddenly Alex dropped to his knees, pulled Tim down beside him and pointed to a bare, decaying branch.

"The Avipeliobark," he hissed. Half camouflaged by a veil of ivy, an ochrish creature, half bird, half snake, with spindly glaucous green, black-fringed legs hugged the branch. Behind them a tree creaked. The creature stirred. Another, answering creak. It arched its back and uncoiled its tail.

"Run!" Alex yelled. "One lash of its tail and we're dead!" Trampling the tangled gingery bracken tresses of Old Mother Leakey underfoot, they hurtled up the path to the open moorland and flung themselves down on the short-cropped turf.

"Safe here," Alex gasped. "It doesn't like open spaces."

Tim caught the faint honeyed scent of early gorse and rolled over, propping himself up on his elbows to shake the tiny dried bells of a sprig of heather he'd plucked. He smiled at his cousin. "There goes old Briscanica, swishing her foamy skirt against the misty headlands on her way to Cornwall."

Alex sprang up. "My Kingdom of Minexmagicorland," he said with a sweeping bow encompassing the landscape, "is yours to explore!"

"It'll be fun," agreed Tim. "Can't wait."