

# MOORHEN

by Kate Okerstrom

A group of pilgrims made their way through an unknown land, looking for new territories to settle. They had been moving for months. The going wasn't easy, as it was untamed and unexplored territory that they trekked through. However, after many months they finally found something worth claiming.

"Look! Oh, look!" they cried to each other, for beneath them was a marsh-filled prairie, located next to a swamp that stretched for miles. It was breathtaking.

After some small exploration the swamp soon proved to be full of edible plants and mineral-rich soil, and so some of the settlers decided to stay. For a while they were content with their untamed marshland. But as the population of the settling grew, more houses were needed, and they cut deeper and deeper into the swamp. The development of the town was going smoothly. That is, until one of the pilgrim's daughters disappeared. Efforts to find the girl were made but never successful. These disappearances continued to happen, children getting snatched up in the moonlight. Almost a decade later the small town, now named Moorhen, still had no idea what was happening. Children were still vanishing, and the people were still afraid.

One day a strange woman rode into Moorhen upon a mule, led by a young boy. The square fell silent as she lowered her hood and scanned the town with birdlike observation. After a moment she jumped off of the mule and made her way to the inn, the boy trailing behind her. It was clear she intended to stay.

In a small town such as Moorhen news travels fast, and everyone wanted to find out who this woman was. It was soon discovered, through gossip and rumors, that her name was Ethlyn, she was an herbalist, and she was training an apprentice, Horace, to become the same. The townspeople were quite surprised as the baker's son came down with measles and she offered to cure him for the trade of only a few rolls. Even more surprising was the sight of him quite healthy a few days later. Soon many people came to Ethlyn for help, and she was content to oblige. Some people speculated that her medical skills came from dark magic, but as she continued to help that idea was forgotten.

Well, almost forgotten. One mother, a superstitious sort, refused any of Ethlyn's services, even when one of her children caught a cold.

"But Mother," pleaded May, the youngest of the woman's children, "Benton will get much better if we let Miss Ethlyn help!"

"Absolutely not!" said her mother. "She's a practitioner of dark magic! Benton will do fine on his own!"

May sulked for the entire day, frustrated at her mother's delusions. But soon a plan formulated in her head. She got to thinking that if her mother would not buy

Ethlyn's services she would just take some herbs from Ethlyn herself. *I've had to before,* thought May *It shan't be much of a problem to steal again.*

That night May crept into the inn. It smelled musty, with a single candle weakly flickering. May wrinkled her nose as she crept around guests fallen asleep at tables, careful not to bump anything. May darted up the stairs to the hallway where the guest rooms were. *How am I to know which room to look in?* The thought dawned on her with a sinking feeling. She listened helplessly in the dark hallway for a moment before hushed voices tugged on her ears. She tiptoed to a door down the hallway and pressed the side of her head against the wood, heart hammering.

"Just like this, Horace," Ethlyn whispered, "bring your hands upwards, and say Incrementum."

"Like this? Incrementum!" said another voice, who May assumed was Horace.

*What are they doing in there?* Thought May. She noticed a keyhole and peered through it. Horace and Ethlyn sat in the middle of the room, a fern between them.

"Not exactly. Loosen your arms more as you bring them upwards. Incrementum!" said Ethlyn, with as much force as a whisper would allow.

The fern slowly uncurled and grew to the size of Horace. May stumbled back from the keyhole and let out a sharp gasp. Inside of the room fell silent and May watch the door fling open, seemingly by itself.

Ethlyn glared at her. "Come inside," she demanded, and May realized that she was walking forward without intending to.

"M-Ma was right! Y-Y-You are a witch!" May stuttered once she was inside.

"Not so loudly," said Ethlyn. "Now, please do tell me what you were doing outside of my door, hmm?"

May figured she'd better tell them everything. She told them about her brother being sick. She (quite sheepishly) told them about her decision to steal, but they were not too angry. Then, after thinking, she told them about the curse on her town. Horace listened with interest and Ethlyn thoughtfully nodded along. After May finished speaking an idea came to her.

"I have a deal for you," said May. "If you help me find the children that went missing, I shall not tell the village that you are magical. But, if you don't, well...I can't guarantee something won't slip out."

"You're in no position to bargain with us! We could very easily kill y-" Horace started, but Ethlyn silenced him.

"We'd do nothing of the sort," she said sternly. "We have morals, Horace, goodness! But, I suppose since your town has provided us with shelter, we'll provide you with help."

And so May found herself walking home with a cure for her brother and a promise for the town. The next few days Ethlyn and Horace spent searching the area. They used spells and talked to sorrowful families until they found out as much as they

could. May assured the town that they were helping. The townspeople started sending out search parties, but after a week they had found nothing. The suspicious people of Moorhen soon began to think that it was Ethlyn who had been taking the children all along. That night, May couldn't sleep, the creeping fear that the townspeople could be right haunting her. She awoke with a start to a strange rustle and saw a shadowy figure standing outside of her window. She was about to cry out but Horace frantically shushed her.

"Quickly," he urged, "A child is being...well, actually it's quite unclear what's happening. You had better see for yourself."

He helped May out of the window, and as she looked back she thought there were less people in the room than usual. A sickening feeling grew in her stomach as she ran, following Horace into the swamp. They caught up with Ethlyn as she wove through the water, tracking a figure ahead of them. It moved in a rigid way and its eyes were glossy. Still, May recognized them.

"That's Benton!" she whispered hoarsely, "That's my brother!" She began to run to him but was stopped by Horace.

"I'm sorry, but he could lead us to the other children. We have to let him keep going," said Horace, his face solemn.

May nodded and stumbled forwards. The trio followed Benton until he reached a moonlit clearing in the trees, the water slowing him down. He got to the middle of the clearing and stopped, standing completely still. May, Horace and Ethlyn stopped too, their breath quick. The earth began to quake. A patch of the swamp seemed to rise before them, except it had two glowing eyes and a mouth. It lifted its arms up, muttering some long-forgotten spell. Cages of gnarled roots arose from the swamp, all containing shadowed figures. May had to restrain a scream and Horace was sheet white.

They had found the missing children. Most of them looked half-alive, laying in slumped positions like ragdolls. The monstrous thing put Benton in a new cage, then opened its mouth. Thin white strands began to flow out of the children's chests and into its mouth.

"Are those their souls that it's eating? Oh, I can't watch," Horace choked.

"No! I can't let that happen to Benton!" May exclaimed to Ethlyn.

"And it won't," said Ethlyn, reassuring May. "That looks to be some sort of spirit, and when spirits inhabit a physical vessel the weak parts are always the eyes. I shall attempt to hurt its eyes. You two will stay out of sight, understand?"

May and Horace protested but were ignored as Ethlyn crept forwards, summoning vines from the swamp. A quick flick of her wrist sent them spiraling at the spirit, trapping it. This gave Ethlyn a chance to fire tree branches at the spirit's face. It quickly ripped off the vines and swung its arm, creating a wave. Ethlyn was knocked over, but by some miracle regained her footing. The swamp monster swiped its arm at her again, sending her flying. She quickly manipulated a tree to catch her in its

branches. The spirit ripped the tree out of the ground and shook it, catching Ethlyn off guard and she fell, her arm bending at an odd angle when she hit the ground.

"We have to DO SOMETHING!" May shouted at Horace, who was struggling to keep calm. "Miss Ethlyn is not going to survive this!"

"I know, I know!" he said fretfully, "but what can we do?"

May looked over at the cages and the fearful children trapped inside. She noticed Benton huddled in a corner of one of them, sobbing quietly as the battle raged. She poked Horace.

"Quickly, the other children!" she exclaimed. He nodded and they sprinted to the cages, quickly trying to unlock them.

"It's not working!" she said, growing panicky.

"Stand back!" said Horace. He stepped back and summoned tree roots, sending them twisting around the bars of each cage. Horace jerked them all back and the cage bars snapped, wood flying in all directions.

"Excellent!" said May, "Now we need to get them out of here!"

May ran to Benton's cage. "Benton!" she shouted.

"M-May?" he replied, trembling. "What's going on? I-I don't-"

"There's no time, Benton!" she screamed. "Please, just take everyone else back to the village! You'll die if you don't go, so please, run!"

Benton gave her a shaky nod and started to gather the other children. Some of them were more conscious than others. They helped him drag the unconscious ones out of their cages. Soon a cluster of kids had gathered in front of Benton. Unfortunately, the swamp demon turned and saw them freed from their cages. It let out a furious roar and charged towards them.

"Go, GO!" shrieked Horace

The children ran off as fast as they could, with May in the lead. They stumbled blindly through the night towards the lights of the village. *We aren't going to make it*, she thought with despair. But as she looked back she saw Horace and Ethlyn hiding behind two trees, arms outstretched. A vine hung between the tree trunks. As the spirit charged towards the children Horace and Ethlyn pulled the vine taut, and the spirit's vessel ran right through it. At first it seemed as if nothing happened, but then the monster's body fell, sending its decapitated head tumbling forwards. The children screamed as it came towards them, landing wedged between two trees. Some of the children began to cheer, but as May looked at the head she noticed vines from it creeping back towards the creature's body.

Before she could say anything Ethlyn saw and sent two jagged sticks through the air.

Each landed directly in the spirit's eyes. It let out a shriek, sending everyone's hands to their ears. The glowing eyes sent out blinding beacons of light, then went out. May slowly took her hands away from her ears and looked at it in shock.

"You killed it!" she said to Ethlyn, her voice ecstatic. Ethlyn smiled at her, her broken arm hanging limply. "But are you going to be alright?"

"Oh, I'll be fine. But indeed, it shall not bother your village any longer," she said. "Let's take the children back to the village."

May nodded, then ran to Benton, wrapping him in a hug.

"What...what happened May?" stuttered Benton, still looking quite shocked.

"I don't really know myself," said May. "I guess Mother was right in that magic is real? That's a bit concerning, I think. But what matters most is that we found the children."

"I suppose so," said Benton, smiling a little. Together they walked over to Horace and Ethlyn, and they led the group of children back to their home.

The festival that the town threw lasted for an entire week, held in the honor of the trio who saved the children. Somehow May had persuaded everyone to believe that the children had been taken by kidnappers, but it was better for the truth to stay a secret. Of course Benton was never really quite the same, and of course there were not happy reunions for everyone. Some of the children had died after being rescued, as they were there longer than others and so too far gone, but the villagers helped the families of those children in their grieving. After the festivities were over, Ethlyn surprised the town by telling them that she and Horace were leaving.

"Why must you go?" May said to them as they prepared to leave. "Do you not wish to stay with us?"

"Sweet May," said Ethlyn, "do not think of it as that. Horace and I are travelers by nature, and there is much he has yet to learn."

"We'll miss you, sure, but I need to finish my training," said Horace. "I don't think that will work out so well in Moorhen."

May reluctantly nodded, understanding but still not wanting to accept it. "Will you at least try to come and visit?"

"Perhaps," said Ethlyn, "Our paths will cross again."

"Oh, I'll miss you two!" she sniffed, hugging them each in turn. "Good luck on your travels. And please do come back, Moorhen needs its herbalists!"

May watched them as they left, their figures slowly becoming a dot on the distant hills. *Thank goodness they came to stay, May thought. If they hadn't, why, I'd surely have become spirit food.*