

Beneath the Hollow Tree

That night, Grace spent one last night in her bedroom. (She and Thomas both agreed they would switch rooms the next day, since it was too late at night to move all of their things.) While she was trying to sleep, she heard the usual screams coming from outside her window. It sounded like a human voice--a man's voice this time. And Grace thought she could hear the words, "Help me! Help me!" repeated over and over again.

She stood up, and walked to the door. "How could anyone be expected to sleep like this?" she said to herself. "I don't care if the castle is protected. Those sounds are too horrid."

Grace meant Henry coming out of his room. He was fastening his sword belt around his waist. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Someone's in trouble," Henry said. "I'm going to help them."

"You can't fight ghosts with a sword," Grace said. She laughed, in spite of herself. Maybe it was a nervous laughter.

"So you're the expert on ghosts now?" Henry asked sarcastically. "We won't know unless we try."

John came out of his room as well. "You guys hear it too, huh?" he asked. Then he saw Henry's sword. "Henry, that sword won't work at all. But I've got a book of incantations and charms from the library here," John held it up.

"Are you a trained sorcerer?" asked Grace.

"No, but, anyone can read the words," John said. "It looks very clear."

Another door opened, and they saw Robert coming out. He looked at the three of them standing there. "Did you hear the voice?" he asked them. "The voice yelling for help?"

"Yes. I'm going out to help whoever is out there," said Henry.

"I'm going too," said John. "I can be of use for once. I can use the spells and incantations in this book to keep us safe."

"I'll guess I'll go too then," said Grace. "If I can't sleep, I might as well help them. But you don't have to come, Robert. We've caused you enough trouble already. You stay in this castle with your family."

"I'm going out," Robert said. "That voice is my father."

"Are you sure?" asked John.

Robert nodded. "He's out there. The spirits must have him."

"Okay, then we're agreed," said Henry. "Let's go."

They walked down the castle hall. Only Henry carried a weapon with him.

The castle halls were always lit with torches, even in the middle of the night. But when they got to the stairwell going down, it was dark and they had to feel their way down in the dark.

They went down the dark stairs, feeling the way along. They kept their hands on the wall. When they got to the bottom, the hallway was lit again. But as they turned the corner, they ran into General Graten. General Graten was carrying his sword, and there was a look of anger in his eye. They jumped back in surprise, and Henry unsheathed his sword instinctively. General

Graten raised his sword, and Henry attacked. Henry swung his sword at General Graten with all his strength. General Graten raised his sword to deflect the blow. Because Henry had attacked with such strength, the blow staggered General Graten backwards. Before Graten had time to regain his footing, Henry was swinging at him with his sword again. Graten just managed to block the downward swing by raising his sword up again. Henry swung a third time at Graten, but this third swing Graten was ready for. He blocked Henry's sword, and then pushed his sword against Henry's sword, forcing Henry's sword to his right. The handle of Henry's sword was moving backwards against his thumb, and Henry lost his grip. His sword clattered to the floor.

"Ah, you young pup. You never change," laughed General Graten. "Always all brute strength, and no finesse. You were always too eager." He raised his sword, "and now finally I'll put you in your place."

Grace rushed forward between Graten and Henry. "Stop!" she yelled. "What do you have to gain by killing us now? Why are you attacking us?"

Graten lowered his sword, confused. "Attacking you? But you attacked me."

"You ran at us with your sword drawn," said John.

"Henry drew his sword first," said Graten.

"What are you doing in these castle hallways carrying your sword?" asked Grace.

Graten looked at all of them, as if confused by the questions. Then he lowered his sword. "Can you hear the yelling coming from outside?" he asked. "I was going out to see what it was."

There was silence, and then it was John who broke the silence with a nervous laugh. "Of course. Of course. You could hear it from your windows too."

"And because you don't talk to anyone in the castle, no one told you," said Grace.

"Told me what?" asked Graten.

"About the spirits," said Henry. "The ghosts of the monsters."

Graten looked either confused or disgusted. "Spirits?"

"We're going out," said Henry. "You can join us if you want. But we've been told it's ghosts and spirits out there."

"Then why are you going out?" asked Graten.

"Because we're not afraid of ghosts," said Henry.

"Because I can hear my father's voice," said Robert.

"There are incantations in this book," said John.

"Because I can't sleep another night listening to those ghosts," said Grace.

Graten nodded his head to Grace. "For once we agree about something. I can't spend the night just listening to those sounds. If you're going out, I'm coming with you."

"How do we know you won't stab us in the back when we look away?" asked John.

"As you yourselves just pointed out," Graten said, "I would have no possible reason to kill you now. I'd never make it back to King Richard to get my reward travelling through this forest by myself."

John looked questionly at the others. Henry nodded. "He speaks sense," he said. "Let's go."

The castle was not surrounded by a moat, nor did it have a drawbridge. There were several wooden doors, each of which were latched from the inside. There were guards who patrolled the hallway, but they did not station themselves at one particular door for the whole time, and by waiting in the shadows until a guard walked past, they were able to make a dash for the door. John quickly grabbed one of the torches from the hallway walls for light, and then they unlatched the door, went out, and closed the behind them again.

It wasn't until they had stepped out into the forest that John realized the obvious. "We should have left someone behind behind the door," he said. "Now we'll have no way of getting back inside the castle."

There was a big gust of wind, and all 5 of them suddenly felt quite cold.

The wind also blew out the torch that John was carrying. But as it turned out, they didn't really need the torch. It was a full moon, and the moonlight shone through the trees and illuminated the whole forest.

But as the moonlight was filtered through the tree branches, and fell down in rays of moonlight, they also imagined that they could see flickering shapes and light playing in the moonlight. Or was it their imagination? Was there something there in the moonlight air?

And what had happened to the screaming? 30 minutes before, they had all heard a voice yelling "help me". Now, they could hear only the sound of the win. They strained their ears to try to hear the voice again.

"Grace!" called a voice. They all jumped. But then they saw someone running behind them. It was Thomas.

"Thomas, what are you doing here?" asked Grace.

"I was worried," Thomas said. "After our conversation today, I thought maybe you'd try and sneak out tonight. So I got up in the middle of the night to check, and I saw you going out the door."

"Did you close the door?" asked John.

"It's okay," said Thomas. "I woke Marcia up. She's standing next to the door. She'll let us back in if we knock. You guys, don't you know how dangerous it is out here at night? The castle is protected by charms, but you're in danger out in the forest."

"Don't you hear the voice?" asked Grace. "The one yelling for help?"

"There's no one yelling for help," Thomas said. "It's just the usual spirit cries."

"We all heard it," John said.

"I heard it as well," said General Graten.

Thomas seemed confused. "I didn't hear any voice yelling for help," he said.

Just then, the voice was carried in by the wind. It was a sound that seemed to come from nowhere in particular, but it was very clear. "Help me," the voice said.

"There it is," said Henry.

“There what is?” said Thomas.

“Thomas, didn’t you hear that?” asked Grace.

Just then, on one of the moonbeams, they all saw a face. It was a white face in the air. It was grinning a very horrible grin. They all saw it on the moonbeam for one instant, and then it disappeared. “The spirits!” said Thomas. “We have to get back to the castle now.”

“I’m not afraid of the ghosts,” said Henry.

“Henry, don’t be stupid,” said Thomas. “You can’t fight ghosts with that sword.”

“Maybe not,” said General Graten. “Material weapons are no use against the spirit world, or so they say. But what can the spirits do to us? Can a spirit made of air and smoke harm the solid body?”

Thomas looked at General Graten in shock, as if he couldn’t believe the question was being seriously asked. Then he answered. “Most assuredly sir, they can. There are many tales in the history books of spirits inflicting the most terrible torments on the human body.”

“Help me!” The cry came through the air again. It was impossible to tell in which direction it came from.

“Father!” Robert yelled out. “Father it’s me! Where are you?”

“Robert?” the voice answered.

“Yes, father, it’s me!”

“Robert, do not come alone. The danger is too great.”

“Father, I have friends with me. Where are you?”

“What are you yelling at?” asked Thomas.

“Can you still not hear it?” asked General Graten.

“I am trapped within the ground,” came the reply from the voice. “Go to the hollow tree.”

“Where is it?” asked Robert.

“The birds will guide you,” said the voice. “If you ask them.”

Robert looked around at everyone. Henry nodded to Robert. “Go ahead,” he said. Robert called out to the night air, “Oh, night birds of the forest, I, Robert, son of Midor, seek your guidance.”

There was a flutter of wings, and an owl flew down from one of the trees. “Son of Midor,” said the owl. “What do you seek?”

“The hollow tree,” said Robert. “My father told me to find it. I don’t know which hollow tree he meant.”

“There are many hollow trees in the forest,” the owl replied. “But I think I know which one he meant. Follow me.”

They followed the owl as he flew through the forest. The owl flew fairly fast, so they had to run to keep up with him. As they ran, they could hear ghosts and spirits moaning in the wind, and occasionally they could see the outline of a spirit show up in the moonlight. But although the spirits were all around them as they ran, the spirits never touched them.

Eventually the owl stopped at a tree. Robert knew instantly that it was hollow just by looking at it. It was a tall tree, with a huge trunk, but the trunk of the tree had a large opening on it near the bottom.

“Here I will leave you, Son of Midor,” said the owl, and he flew away. But Robert could already see the steps under the tree trunk leading down into the earth.

“Who knows where this leads,” said Robert to the others, “Or what we may encounter down there. I am going down, but you do not need to follow me.”

“We are not afraid,” said Henry.

“We’re going with you,” said Grace.

“I wish I still had that torch,” said John. “It’s going to be dark in there.”

“He’s right,” said Thomas. “We can’t descend without torches. We’d never be able to see a thing. I’ll run back to the castle and get some.”

“I’ll go with you,” said John.

They came back soon, each carrying two torches. The four torches were distributed so that Robert, Grace, John and Thomas each had one. Henry and General Graten held their swords. And then, Robert started down the steps.

After having climbed down the stairs, they found themselves in a large underground chamber. The floor was paved with stones, and the roof was wooden planks. To their surprise, they didn’t need their torches. At the end of a long underground room, there was a grove of trees above a ground covered with grass. And the light shown as if it were daytime.

“What in the world is this?” General Graten asked.

“Father?” Robert called out. “Where are you?”

“Can you see the grove?” answered a voice.

“Yes.”

“Do not come into the grove yet. Whatever you do, do not walk into the grove.”

“Okay.”

“Keep your feet outside of the grove, but reach your hand in. Make sure your feet stay outside.”

Robert walked over and put his feet at the edge of the grove, where the floor was still stones. He put his hand into the grove.

“I can’t reach,” said the voice. “Is there anyone with you?”

“Yes,” Robert answered.

“Okay, have them stand just outside the grove. Ask them to hold onto your left hand. Make sure they hold it tight with both hands. Then put only one foot into the grove, and reach your right hand in. Do you understand?”

“Yes father.”

“Whatever you do, do not put both feet into the grove.”

“I understand father.”

Henry held Robert's left hand, as he stepped into the grove, taking care to only put one foot inside.

Suddenly, there was a voice from the entrance to the chamber. "Stop this, you fools! What are you doing?" It was Talon, climbing down the stairs. "Get away from there."

Robert stepped back out of the forest. "What is wrong?" he asked.

"What are you doing here?" asked Talon, his face red with fury.

"My father's voice is coming from inside that grove," said Robert.

"Get back to the castle this instant," said Talon.

"But what about my father?" asked Robert.

"Is that Talon?" came the voice of Midor. "Son, do not listen to him. He has imprisoned me in here."

There was a shocked silence which followed this. Then Robert asked, "Is this true?"

"You don't understand," said Talon. "I have to keep the forest safe. He was going to ruin everything."

"Son, whatever you do," said Midor's voice, "Do not give Talon time to say the incantation. He's a sorcerer, but he can still be defeated if you act quickly."

There was a pause as everyone looked at each other. Henry and General Graten both had their swords by their sides, but they were clearly all thinking the same thing. Defeat Talon? But Talon was a member of the Castle. King Carlyle treated him like family.

"Talon, help get my father out of there," said Robert. "Or I will speak to King Carlyle about this."

"Son of Midor," said Talon menacingly, "King Carlyle will never know about this." He uttered a low guttural incantation in a language none of them had heard before while he thrust his arm out. Robert was knocked backwards as if hit by a gust of wind, and went right into the grove and disappeared.

Grace screamed "Robert!"

Henry and General Graten raised their swords, but they were still hesitant to cut down the man. In their hesitation, Talon uttered another guttural incantation, and pointed at General Graten. Graten was then knocked into the grove, and also disappeared.

Henry now ran towards Talon. Talon uttered the same incantation and pointed at Henry, but Henry dropped to the ground and slide along the floor so that Talon's arm was pointing over him. A gust of wind went over Henry's head, but did not touch him. Henry then straightened up again, and was now right next to Talon. He raised his sword, but Thomas yelled out. "Henry no!" Henry hesitated. "You can't kill him," said Thomas. "He's one of us. He's part of our castle."

That hesitation was all Talon needed. He uttered his cry once more, and pointed at Henry. Henry was blown backwards into the grove, and disappeared.

"Talon, what are you doing?" yelled Thomas.

"Be still, Thomas," said Talon.

“What happened to them,” yelled Grace. “Where did you send them? Are they okay?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” said Talon.

“He can’t get all of us at once,” said John. “Get him.”

John and Grace rushed for Talon. Thomas reluctantly joined them. Talon pointed at John and yelled the incantation. John was knocked backwards into the grove and disappeared, but Grace and Thomas were able to grab Talon.

The old wizard looked old and frail, but he was surprisingly stronger than he looked. Grace tried to grab Talon and throw him to the ground, but instead he freed himself from her grip and pushed her away. He started to mutter his incantation, but Grace grabbed him again and tried to cover his mouth to stop him. Thomas pushed Talon from behind and knocked him over, but as he fell he grabbed onto Grace and both of them fell to the ground at once. There was some tussling on the ground as Grace and Thomas tried to subdue Talon by wrestling him down, but he was too strong for them. He threw them off once again, and leapt to his feet. But in all the commotion and rolling around on the floor, Talon had moved closer to the grove. When Talon stood up again now, he was standing right in front of the grove. His back was to the grove, and he was facing Thomas and Grace. They both leapt to their feet and ran forward to attack. Talon uttered his incantation and pointed at Thomas, and knocked Thomas backwards. Thomas fell back, but because Talon was now facing the other way, Thomas landed on the stone and the stone floor and was not blown into the Grove. Because Talon had attacked Thomas first, he didn’t have time to stop Grace. Grace collided into Talon at a full run, and the two of them tumbled over and fell into the grove, where they both disappeared.

Thomas stood up. He looked around him and noticed he was the only one left in the room. Then he ran up the stairs and out of the room.