

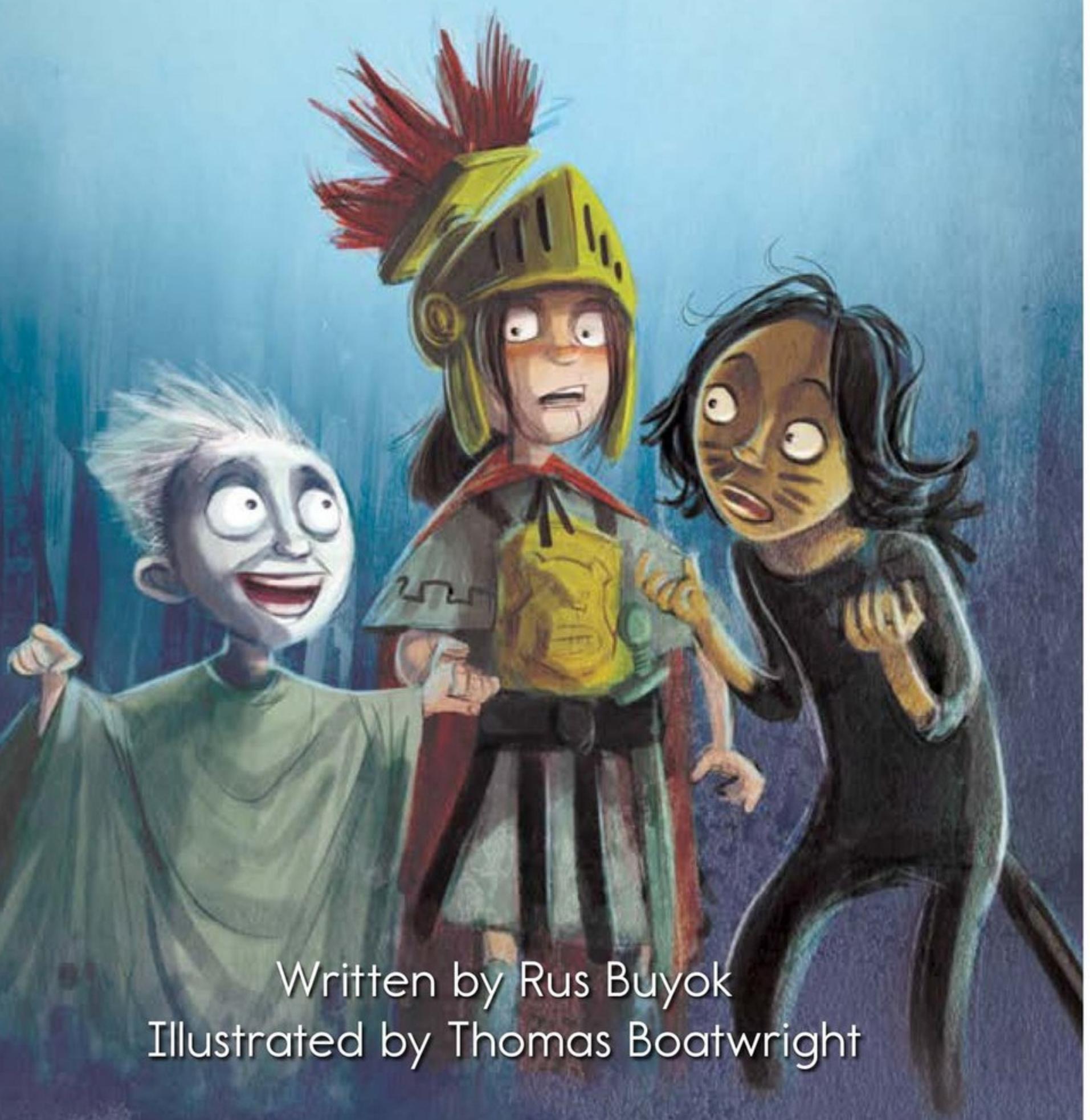
LEVELED Book • Q

THE HOLLOW



Written by Rus Buyok
Illustrated by Thomas Boatwright

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“I’m scared,” Sarah says, looking around at the trees. Empty branches reach out of the darkness like skeletal hands. Those hands scratched and tore at our costumes as we ran here. I lost my warrior’s shield, Sarah lost her cat ears, we lost our flashlights and most of our candy, and Jake’s **ghost** costume is in **tatters**.

I'm just as **terrified** as Sarah. It's all I can do not to curl up and cover my face till morning, but I have to take care of Jake.

"There's nothing to be scared of," I say. "It's just the Hollow. We walk by it every day."

"Every day, yes, but this is **Halloween** night," Sarah whines. "You know the Hollow is **haunted**. They say if you play in these woods, some kids will come play with you—and they never let you leave. You become a ghost like them. That's why you don't go in the Hollow."

"Stop it—you're scaring Jake," I say.



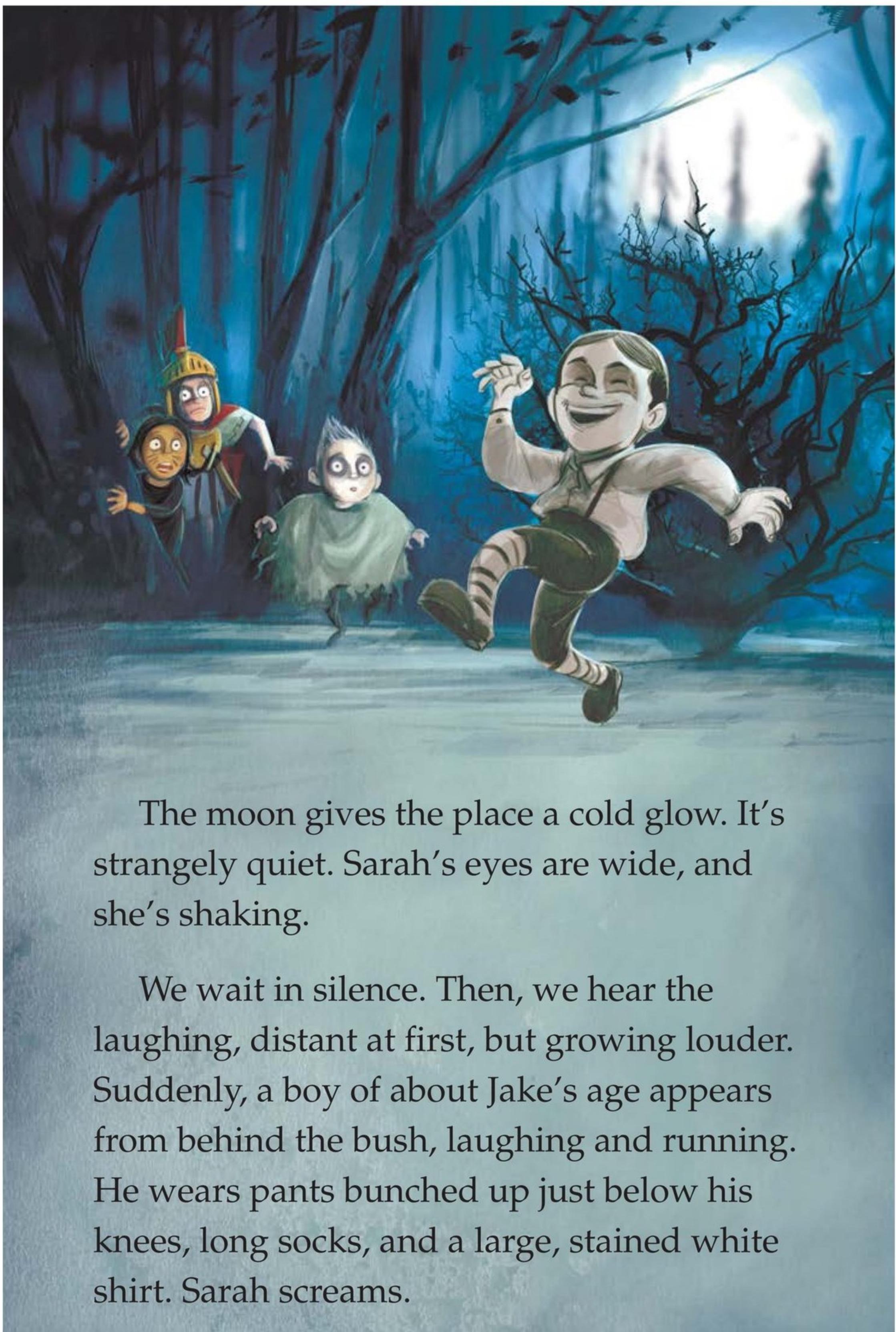
“Are the ghosts going to get Odie?” Jake asks, looking up at me. He’d insisted on bringing his wiener dog trick-or-treating with us. As we walked by the Hollow, Odie heard something move in the forest and bolted into the darkness. Jake chased Odie, I chased Jake, and my friend Sarah chased me. “Are the ghosts going to get us?”

“No way, little bro. There’s no such thing as ghosts.” Jake doesn’t look as if he believes me. “Let’s just find Odie and go home.”

We start walking, stopping every few minutes to untangle Jake’s costume from the branches. Strange sounds follow us. The whispering of movement in the dead leaves on the ground. The creak of branches. A snapping twig. My nerves are just about to snap when we hear it: a faint barking.

“It’s Odie!” Jake starts to run. Sarah and I run after him, our hands up to protect our faces from the trees’ claws.

Suddenly, we burst into a clearing where nothing grows except for a **gnarled** thornbush.



The moon gives the place a cold glow. It's strangely quiet. Sarah's eyes are wide, and she's shaking.

We wait in silence. Then, we hear the laughing, distant at first, but growing louder. Suddenly, a boy of about Jake's age appears from behind the bush, laughing and running. He wears pants bunched up just below his knees, long socks, and a large, stained white shirt. Sarah screams.

“Odie!” Jake takes off toward the bush. Odie jumps from behind it, sees Jake, and starts running toward him. The two meet in the middle of the clearing, and Jake hugs Odie so tightly that I think the dog might burst.



“Thank you for finding our dog,” I say to the boy.

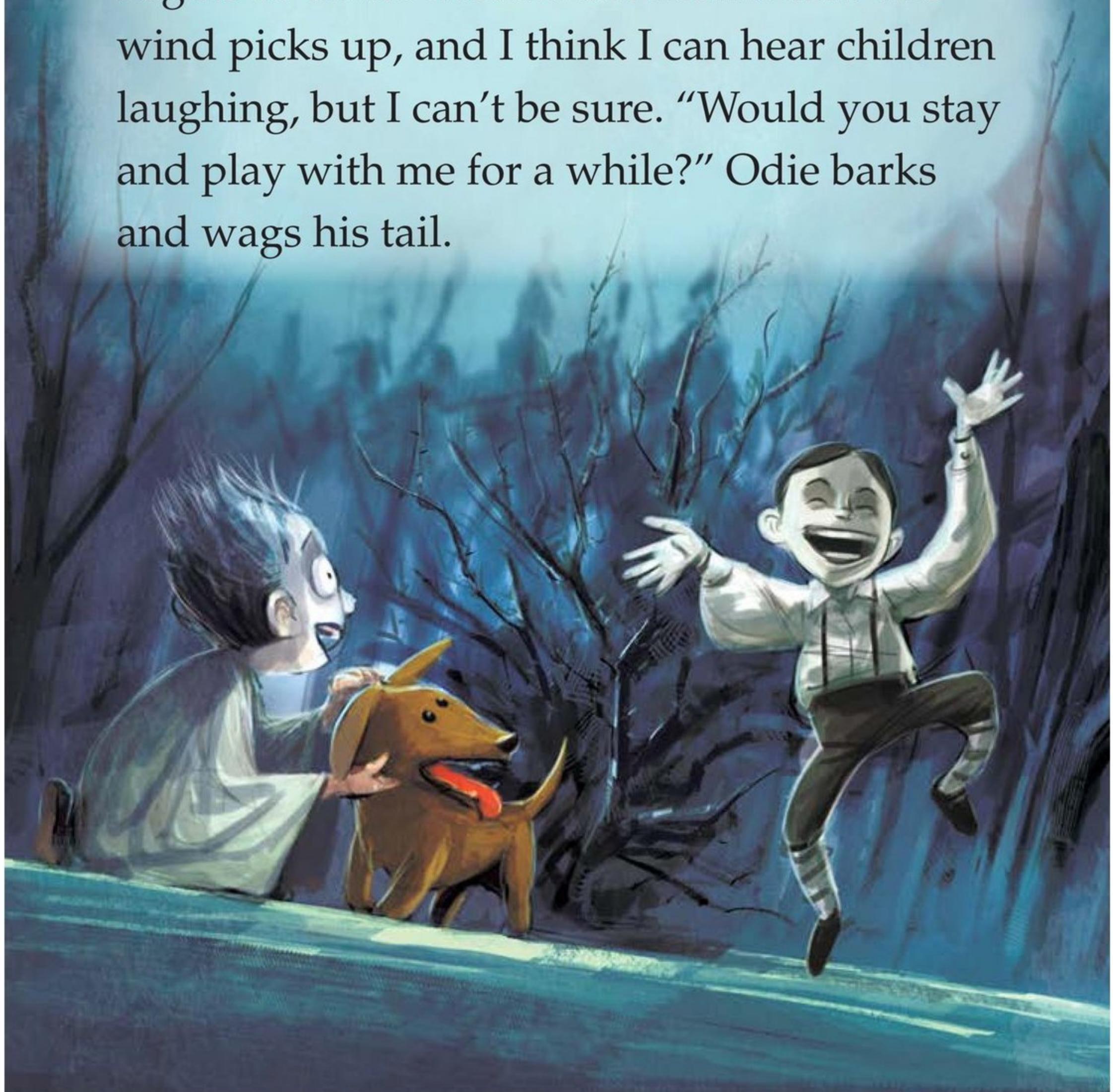
The boy nods. Up close, I see that his skin is very pale, he has black circles around his eyes, and he looks very hungry.

"Wow, great costume," Sarah says. "Who are you supposed to be?"

"A ghost," he replies.

"Should you be out here by yourself?" I ask. "Where do you live?"

"I'm not alone," he says with a laugh and begins to dance around the thornbush. The wind picks up, and I think I can hear children laughing, but I can't be sure. "Would you stay and play with me for a while?" Odie barks and wags his tail.



"Kid, you are totally creepying me out," Sarah says.

"Can we?" Jake looks excited. "Odie really likes him."

"No!" Sarah yells before hissing in my ear, "That's how the ghosts get you. You play with them, and you never leave."

"It's just a kid trying to **freak** us out," I say. "Look, it's late, we've had a long night, and we just want to go home. Do you know the way back to the road?"



The wind picks up again, and this time I'm almost sure I can hear something like children laughing. The boy tilts his head as if he's thinking really hard. Then he shrugs, sighs, and with a sad smile says, "Okay. You let me play with your dog, so I can show you the way out."



He quickly walks into the forest, moving between the trees as though he knows the position of every branch. We scramble to keep up. I keep hearing what sounds like laughter behind us, but I can't be sure. I start to move a little faster.

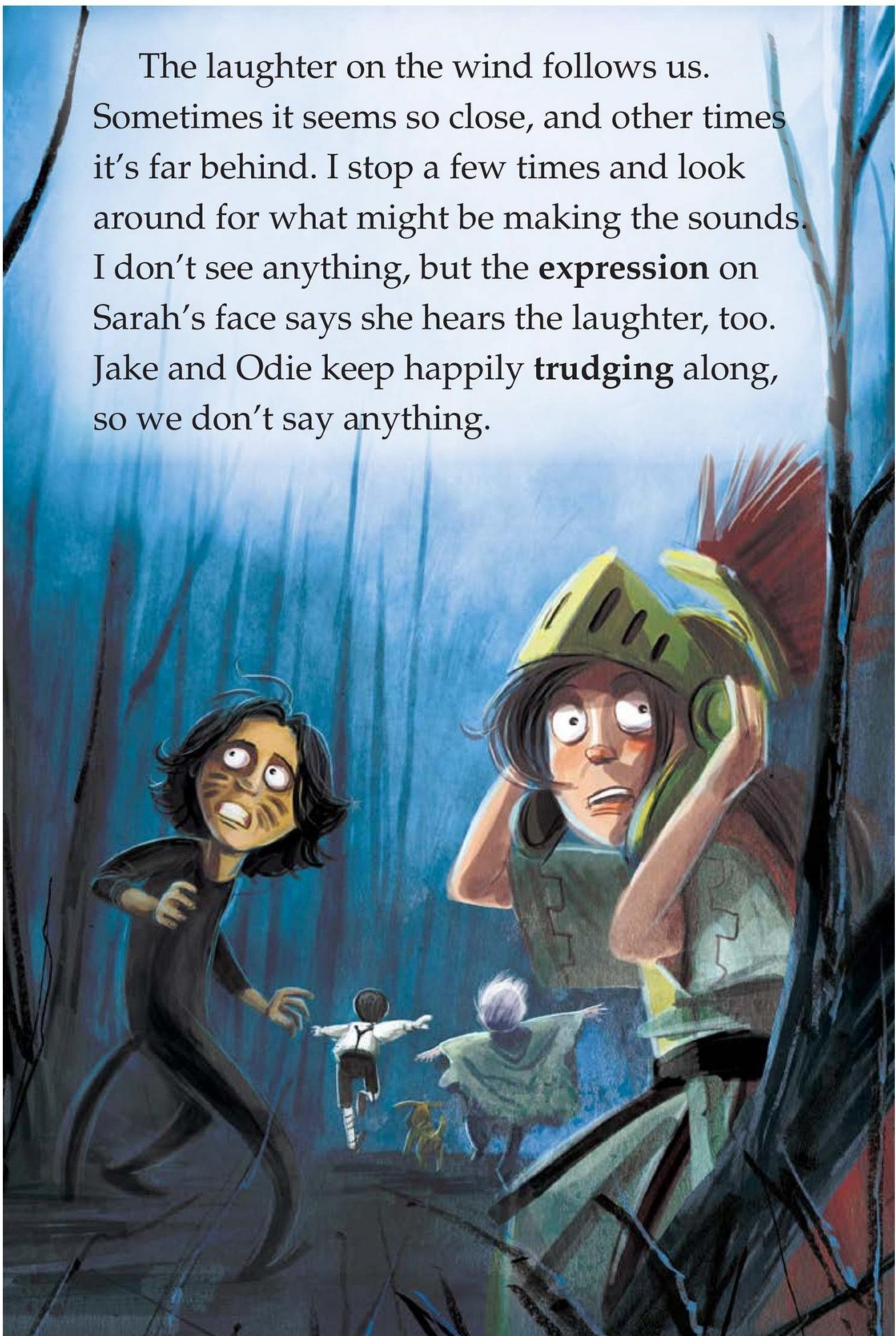


"Why are you in the Hollow by yourself?" I ask, mainly just to listen to something besides the scary noises.

"I just go there—I don't know why," he says. "It's not a bad place. I can hear other kids there sometimes. They're always playing, but I can't find them. I like listening to them because it makes me feel like I'm not alone."

I feel sad for the kid, being all by himself on Halloween. No wonder he was trying to scare us. He probably just wants some attention. I decide that once we're on the road, we'll take him to a few houses to trick-or-treat before taking him home.

The laughter on the wind follows us. Sometimes it seems so close, and other times it's far behind. I stop a few times and look around for what might be making the sounds. I don't see anything, but the **expression** on Sarah's face says she hears the laughter, too. Jake and Odie keep happily **trudging** along, so we don't say anything.





Then the boy stops and points ahead. I can see the yellow glow of the streetlight. It might be the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"Awesome!" Sarah says as she pushes ahead.

"Thank you," I say as we pass the boy. Jake waves goodbye, and Odie barks.

When I step onto the sidewalk, I turn around. The boy is still there, his face just visible. I motion for him to join us. He gives me that sad smile again and steps back into the darkness.

“Hey, kid!” I call out, realizing that I don’t know his name.





I go to the edge of the woods where the boy just stood, but he is gone. I hear children's laughter all around me, but no one is there.

Glossary

expression (<i>n.</i>)	a look on someone's face that shows feeling or emotion (p. 12)
freak (<i>v.</i>)	to make someone uneasy, uncomfortable, or very upset (p. 9)
ghost (<i>n.</i>)	the soul or spirit of a dead person, thought by some to exist, that sometimes appears to the living (p. 3)
gnarled (<i>adj.</i>)	bumpy, rough, and twisted (p. 5)
Halloween (<i>n.</i>)	a holiday on October 31 when children dress up in costumes (p. 4)
haunted (<i>adj.</i>)	occupied or visited by ghosts (p. 4)
tatters (<i>n.</i>)	fabric or clothing that is torn and ragged (p. 3)
terrified (<i>adj.</i>)	greatly frightened (p. 4)
trudging (<i>v.</i>)	walking slowly and heavily due to tiredness or difficult conditions (p. 12)

The Hollow
Level Q Leveled Book
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