LEVELED BOOK • T

THE RETURN TO THE HOLLOW

— PART II —

Written by Rus Buyok
Illustrated by Thomas Boatwright

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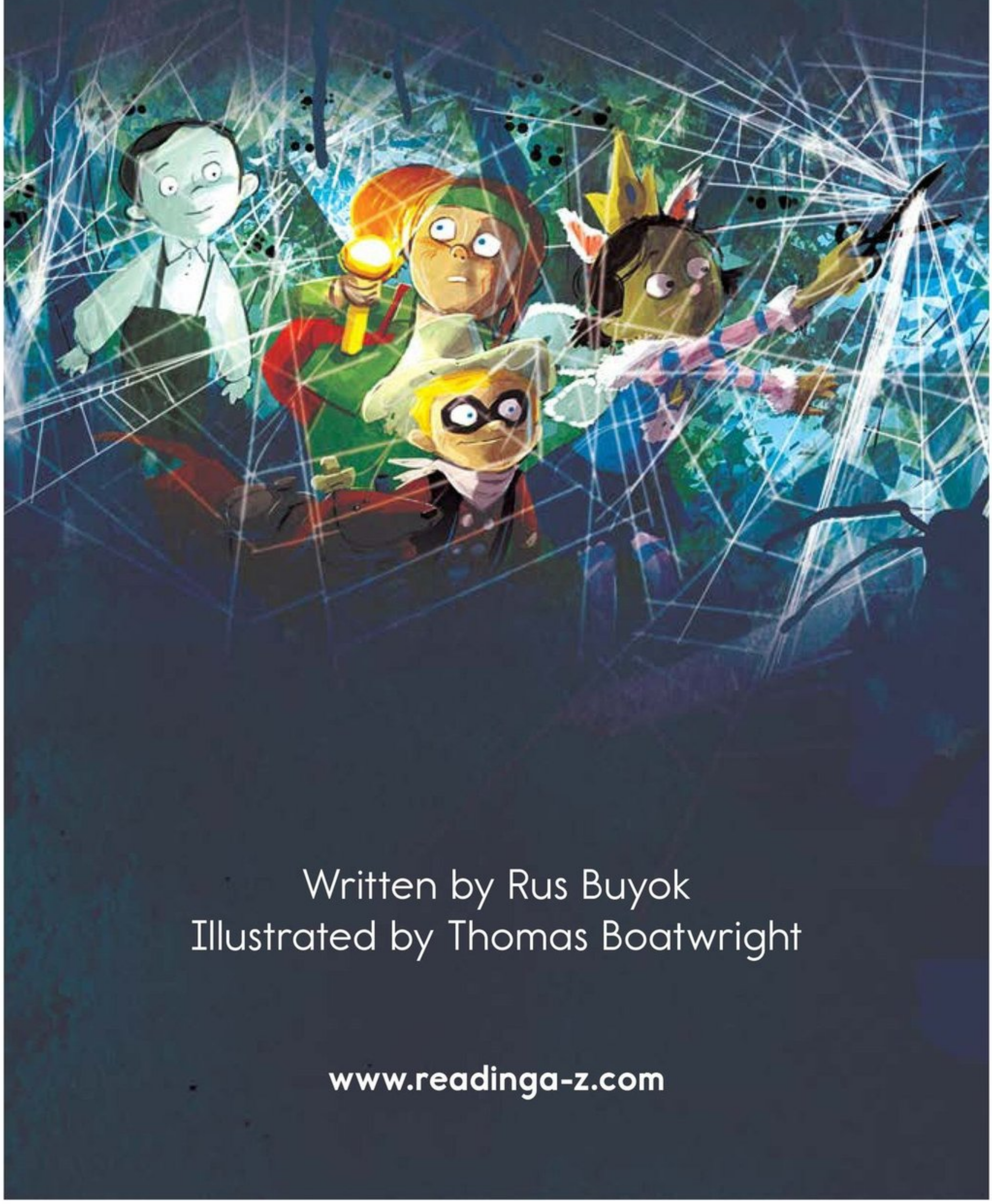

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"I can't believe we're doing this again," Sarah says as we stand on the street, looking into the Hollow. It seems as if the trees are reaching out, trying to pull us into the darkness.

"As near as I can tell, this is the beginning of the path," I say, folding up the map and putting it in my backpack with the scissors and lantern.

Odie, my brother's dog, barks and wags his tail at something in the darkness. I begged my mother to let me go trick-or-treating alone this year, but she insisted that I take Jake or stay home.

"What is it, boy?" Jake asks. Odie whines at the end of his leash.

"Now is as good a time as any," I say and adjust my backpack.

"Are we going to see that boy from last year?" Jake asks as we step off the pavement.

"Maybe," I reply, sharing an **anxious** look with Sarah.

"I hope so," Jake says.

Not far beyond the edge of the trees, the darkness presses in on us. I scan with my flashlight but see nothing. One look at Sarah tells me she feels it, too.

The forest seems to have even more **skeletal** branches than last year pulling at our clothes. Of course, Jake and Odie just **barrel** ahead.

We walk for some time, stopping occasionally to pull out the map and **compass**. It's difficult to tell, but I think we're headed in the right direction.

During one of these pauses, Odie's ears perk up and Jake asks, "What's that noise?" Sarah and I both stand still, and then we hear it—a child humming.

Moving quickly and quietly, we walk toward the sound. We come to the edge of the clearing, and it only takes a moment for me to recognize it. The same thornbush still grows in the center, a little larger now. Just like last year, the boy steps out from behind it, smiling as if he sees old friends. He's wearing the same clothes as last year and looks just as pale.

Odie barks and runs to the boy, Jake not far behind. Soon they're chasing each other and laughing.

"There you are," the boy says, looking at Sarah and me. "I've been waiting for you." The boy tilts his head and starts to walk away. He stops at the edge of the trees and calls back, "Are you coming?"

Jake and Odie start following him. We **plunge** after the boys, once again crashing through the forest, holding our flashlight in front of us. This time, however, we're heading deeper into the Hollow, not toward the safety of the streetlights.

The boy moves so fast, we can hardly keep up. "Where are we going?" I call, wishing I could stop and look at my map.

"Where you've been headed," the boy says with a laugh. As his laugh ends, it's picked up by someone else and then someone else until we're surrounded by children's laughter.

"Keep moving forward," the boy calls.

We do, Jake laughing and Odie barking in the front with Sarah and me running behind, terrified.

Suddenly, we nearly crash into a wall of dark leaves. I try to push some leaves aside to find something behind the wall, but all I see is more darkness.

"What do we do now?" Sarah cries. The laughter increases. The boy stands off to the side, smiling.

"What's this?" Jake asks. He points to an opening, but it's covered with what look like spider webs. I touch them; they feel strong. I try to push through, but they just seem to stretch and spring back into place. I think I hear something hissing in the leaves but can't be sure with all the laughing children.

"Keep moving forward," the boy says, standing beside the opening.

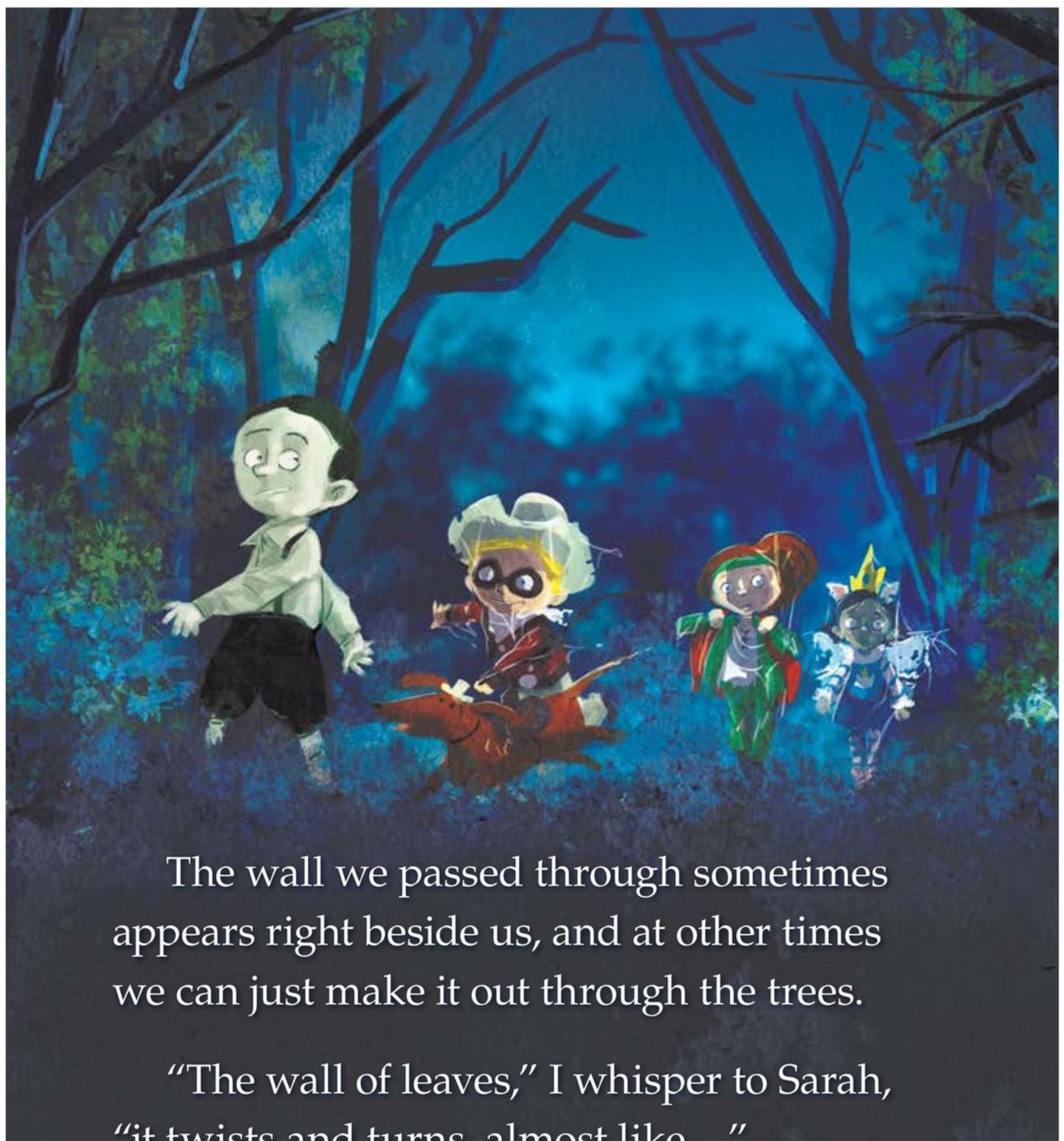
I feel Sarah unzipping my backpack. She steps forward, **brandishing** the scissors and snipping her way through the webs.

We follow Sarah as she cuts a path down a steep **bank**. I quickly shine my light around and see what look like hundreds of small black eyes staring at us. I keep moving, not wanting to know what they belong to.

We climb up another bank and come out on the other side, brushing the clinging webs from our clothes.

"This way," the boy says and runs off again.

"Who are you?" Sarah asks, but the boy doesn't answer. He moves slower through the woods now, which is good because the **underbrush** is thick. I feel as though we're being watched. The laughter is quieter now, but somehow that makes it more **menacing**.



The wall we passed through sometimes appears right beside us, and at other times we can just make it out through the trees.

"The wall of leaves," I whisper to Sarah, "it twists and turns, almost like—"

"A river," she interrupts.

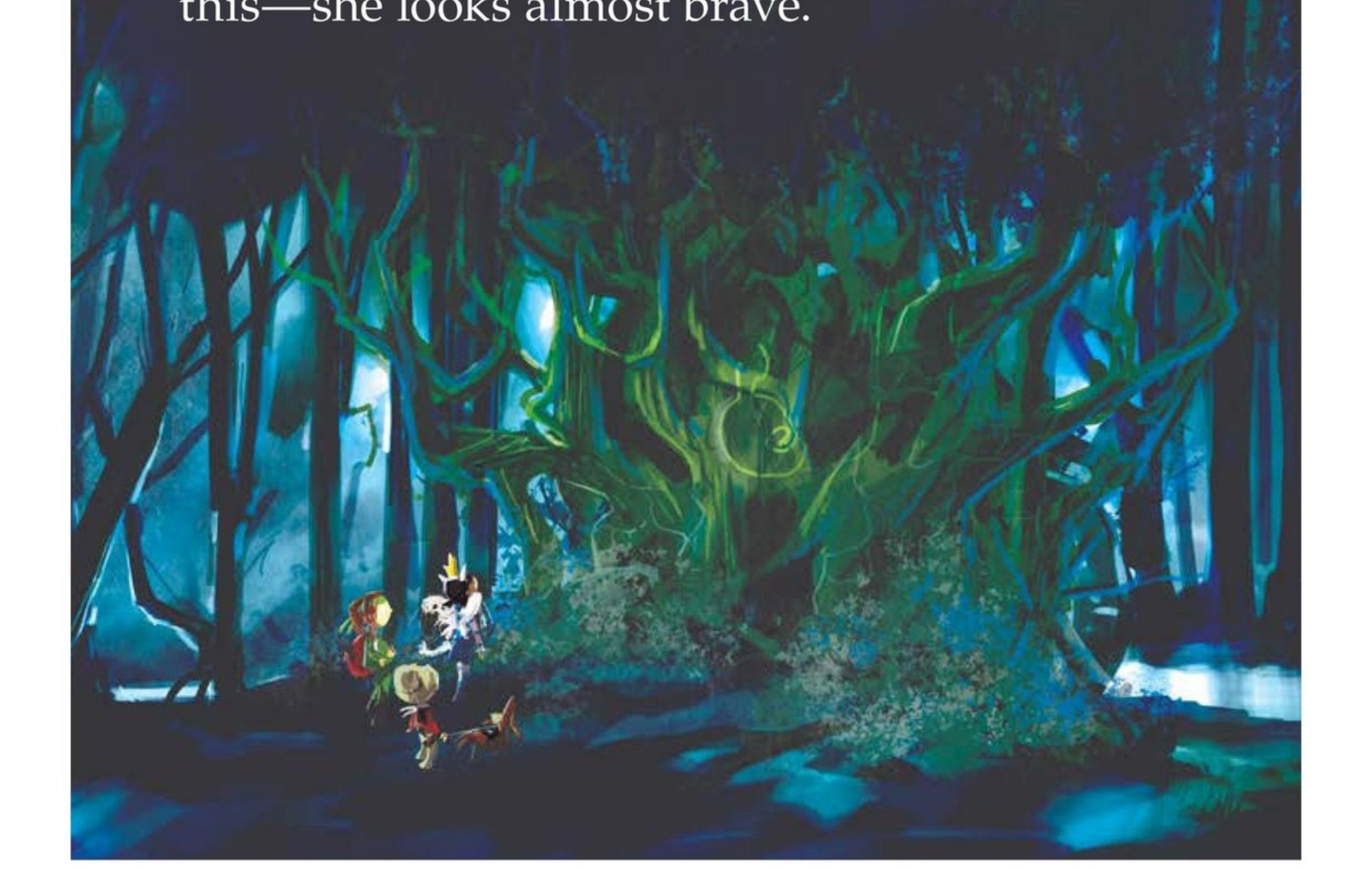
"Where are the other kids?" Jake asks.

"They're coming," the boy replies. Something about this makes me feel more anxious.

Suddenly, the boy turns a corner and is gone. We can't see where, but before us is what looks like a giant tree, the trunk of which is surrounded by thick vines with huge leaves.

The laughter is closer now. Jake and Odie are looking around as if they hear it for the first time.

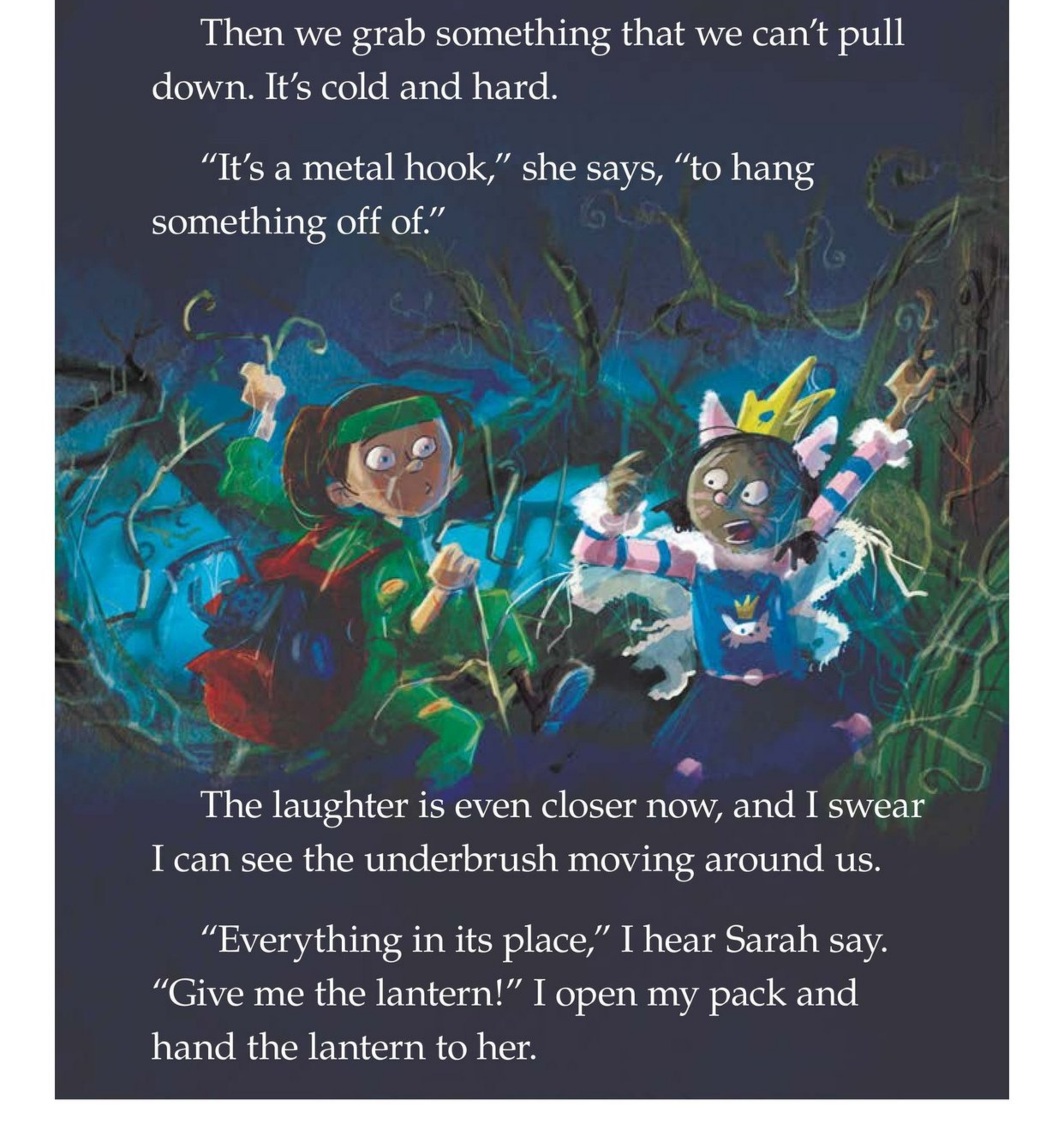
I don't know what to do or where to go. I want to curl up in the leaves and hide, but I can't. I look at Sarah. Her **determined** expression as she looks at this giant tree makes me pause. I've never seen her like this—she looks almost brave.



"Always keep moving forward," she says as she starts to pull at the vines. They're thick and strong, but with both of us working together they start to give way. Even Jake comes and helps.

Then we grab something that we can't pull down. It's cold and hard.

"It's a metal hook," she says, "to hang something off of."



The laughter is even closer now, and I swear I can see the underbrush moving around us.

"Everything in its place," I hear Sarah say. "Give me the lantern!" I open my pack and hand the lantern to her.

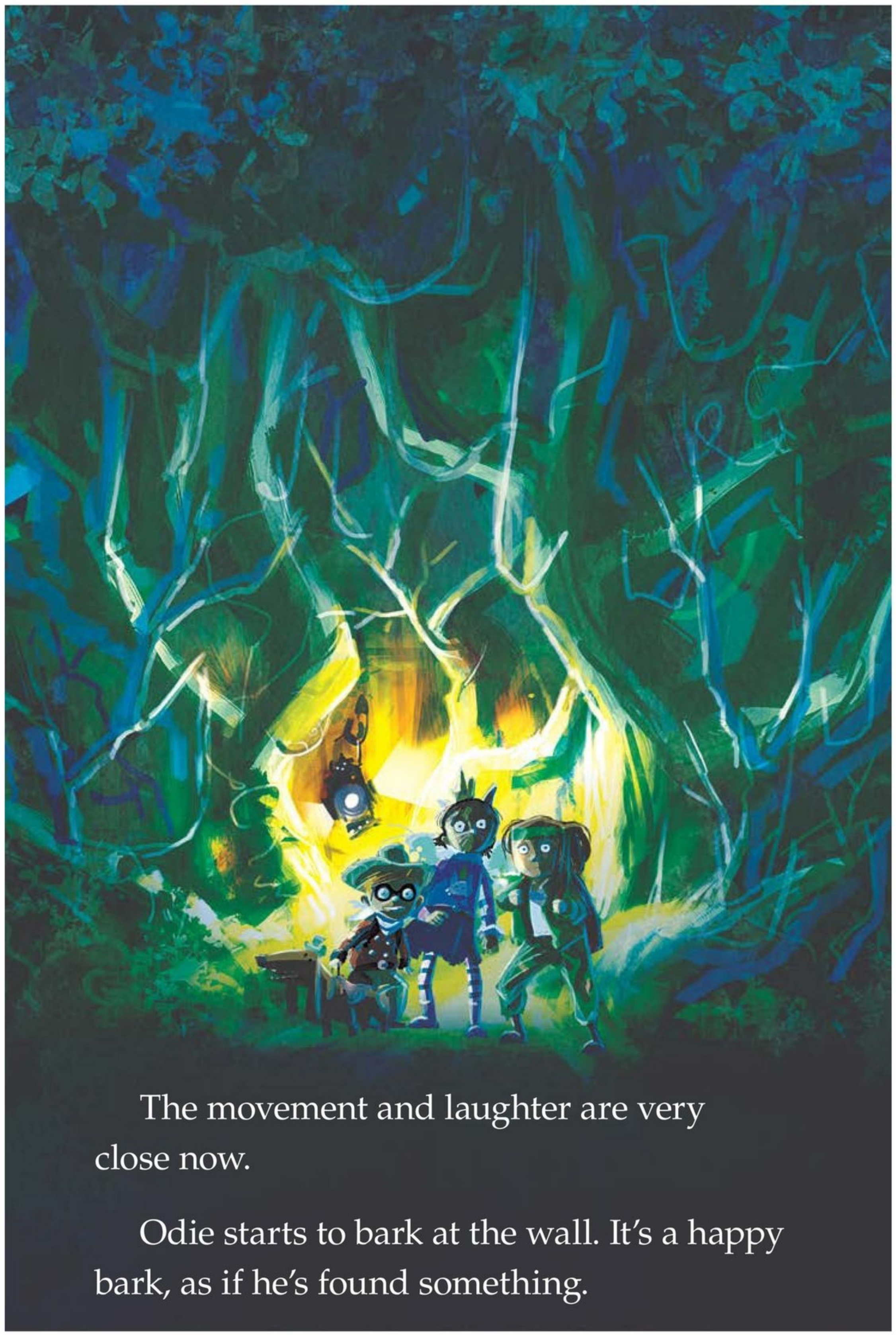
"I think we need to light it," she says.

"I don't have matches," I reply.

"Don't play with matches," Jake says. "I learned from a book how to start a fire in an emergency." He drops to his hands and knees and starts **combing** along the ground.

"Aha!" Jake exclaims and runs over with two plain-looking rocks.

Sarah opens the lantern, and Jake scrapes the rocks together, sending sparks flying. After a few tries, a small flame catches on the oil-soaked **wick**. Sarah closes the door and places the lantern on the hook.



The movement and laughter are very close now.

Odie starts to bark at the wall. It's a happy bark, as if he's found something.

We turn around to see the lamplight reflecting dimly off a door handle we hadn't seen before. Sarah and I turn it and push. With a loud creak, it swings inward.

Jake and Odie rush inside.

Sarah and I look at each other. She gives me a knowing smirk and nods before crawling into the opening through the vines.

I wait until she's clear. The leaves right next to me are moving now, and I think I can hear what sound like little feet.

"C'mon!" I hear Sarah yell, and I dive through the vines as Sarah slams the door shut behind me.

Glossary

anxious *(adj.)*	worried or nervous (p. 4)
bank *(n.)*	a steep, sloping hill or mound (p. 9)
barrel *(v.)*	to move quickly, often in a dangerous or reckless way (p. 4)
brandishing *(v.)*	swinging or waving something in a threatening or menacing way (p. 8)
combing *(v.)*	carefully searching for something (p. 13)
compass *(n.)*	a tool with a magnetic needle that always points north, used for showing direction (p. 5)
determined *(adj.)*	having one's mind made up to do something (p. 11)
menacing *(adj.)*	threatening (p. 9)
plunge *(v.)*	to quickly and forcefully push into something (p. 6)
skeletal *(adj.)*	of or having to do with the skeleton; resembling a skeleton (p. 4)
underbrush *(n.)*	the shrubs and small trees that grow near the ground in a forest (p. 9)
wick *(n.)*	the cord or piece of material in a candle, lighter, or lamp that is lit and holds a flame (p. 13)

The Return to the Hollow (Part II)
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