

Dead Grove

by

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A childish giggle sounded among the apple trees, rivaling with the singing robins, as a happy girl dashed after the most elusive butterfly. The elegant, flickering wings reflected light, bursting in bright colors that had completely mesmerized the girl, yet the glittering beauty gracefully evaded her touch. Breeze in her hair, she frolicked over the tufts of hay, wholeheartedly cherishing the thrill of her little hunt.

Mellow, late afternoon sun bathed the orchard in its golden splendour, creating a breathtaking contrast with the bright white blooms and the deep green grass. The scenery could have been a picture of the sacred garden of Avareth, eternally flourishing in a place and time veiled from mortal eyes.

The falling petals, gently thrown around the field, surrounded her as she ran after the colorful butterfly, gradually steering toward the outskirts of the orchard, and the fence that separated their farm from the woodlands. Somewhere at the back of her mind, she did remember her father's warning.

Never cross the fence on your own, no one comes back from the grove.

But she would not go into the woods, only far enough to reach the butterfly. No harm could come from that. As soon as the haunting guilt was thwarted, she climbed over, nimbly like a young badger, and resumed her hunt—unaware of the forest's subtle call that was already penetrating her

easily manipulated, innocent mind. The closer she wandered, the stronger the call became, and before even realizing it, she had chased the butterfly into the maw of the grove.

Back at the porch, a lonely shepherd hound was barking, sending out warnings, but the girl was too focused, too enthralled, to pay attention. The rest of the family, finishing their daily tasks around the farm, were too far to heed the hound's alarm.

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"Dalthor, where's Aerie?" the woman stormed into what served as their combined lounge and cooking area, pointing her rashy words at the young man resting by the table.

"I thought she was playing outside, mother," he replied, honesty in his startled eyes.

"I can't see her anywhere," she said, clearly in distress. "Where's Kilder?" she then asked, peering about like a trapped animal. "Where's your father?"

"Right here, my dear," a deep voice said from the door. Placing the small sickle, used to tend the apple trees, on the table, he turned to his wife. "What's the matter, Dory? All this racket drove even the magpies away, for which I'm grateful, but I suspect it's not the sole purpose of your upset."

Dory gave him a mean gaze, but it barely lasted for a blink before the anxiety returned. "Airelyn has gone missing," she spluttered, "I've looked everywhere."

Wrapping his arms around Dory, Kilder kissed her forehead and looked her straight into the amber gold of her eyes, smiling, knowing it had a calming effect on his beloved. "I saw Aerie just a few moments ago chasing butterflies in the orchard, so I'm sure she's fine, but I will go find her for you."

"Please do," she said, responding to his loving hug. "It'll be dark soon, and I don't want her anywhere near the forest."

Kilder's face grew grim, but he forced a smile despite his suddenly tightened jaw. "Worry not, my dear, I'll find her and you will see there is nothing to fear." While still talking, Kilder was already rushing toward the door. With a child who had barely eleven summers upon her shoulders, he could never fully trust her to remember all the warnings she was given. Dory mentioning the grove had instantly made him nervous.

"Aerie?" he called while vigorously scanning the blooming trees, but there was no response. The mild breeze continued humming among the gently swaying branches, highlighting the silence that now prevailed in the yard.

Feeling restless, clenching his fists in increasing strain, Kilder rushed through the orchard, calling out his daughter's name all the way through, hoping that the often absent-minded girl would

snap out of whatever she was doing and respond to her father. The magpies cawed together with the singing robins, disturbed by his sudden presence. The bees buzzed, the dog barked, but the vivid voice of their youngest remained quiet.

The dog barked.

Kilder halted, gazing at their loyal shepherd hound, who was standing on the porch, staring keenly somewhere while making awful racket. *The dog never barks— not unless she has sensed something highly unusual*, he thought while striding back to the house.

While Kilder was searching the orchard, his son, Dalthor, took on the task of checking the front. When, a few moments later, they both returned empty-handed, Dory began to shiver, sniffing in despair.

"She has gone to the grove," she wailed, "gone to the grove..." her tremulous voice faded, drowning into comfortless snivel.

She held on to the table to keep balance until Dalthor kindly helped her to sit. The fear for her daughter's life was so intense that it effectively rendered her unable to function at all.

"I'm going after her," Kilder promised sternly, quietly scolding himself for letting the girl out of his sight. "I will bring her home, Dory."

Dalthor grabbed an iron fork from the hearth. "I'm coming with you," he said.

"I can't let you do that," Kilder quickly refused. "Somebody has to stay and take care of Dory. I will see if old Berry can find her trail. The dog is definitely upset, as you can hear, so I must hurry while the scent is strong."

Wanting to argue, Dalthor held his tongue, understanding his father's reasoning despite being unhappy about the situation. In the end, he realized how much more help their shepherd hound offered than he ever could, so grinding his teeth, Dalthor sat down next to his mother and did his best to offer comfort.

Kilder was not there to see the sweet gesture, for he was already outside, smacking his lips to call the hound. "Come, Berry," he called. "Find Aerie!"

The hound gave an approving grunt as a sign of excited understanding and took off instantly with Kilder right on her heels. Having seen the location where Aerie had crossed the fence, it was not difficult for Berry to pick up her scent. Verifying Kilder's fear, she ran straight toward the grove.

He saw dents in the grass from her little feet where she had tried to catch the butterfly, leading up to the fence. An invisible fist strangled his heart as he watched the tracks resuming on the other side.

"All the warnings I gave her..." Kilder muttered, anger attempting to take over, but the fear for Aerie's life was stronger, swiftly defeating the useless, utterly pointless rage. Time for any kind of discipline would come once the girl was safely back home.

Aerie would not be the first nor the last to get lost in the grove, but as far as Kilder was concerned, she would be one of those rare ones who came back unharmed. Climbing over the fence, he urged Berry to find her trail and follow. Hesitating, feeling the strange aura radiating from the woods, Berry woofed to gather her courage before darting into the grove, bending her ears back as a sign of dread. But she was determined, willing to help her beloved master despite the haunting whispers trying to confuse her. Kilder followed Berry, suspiciously leering at the looming trees overshadowing the narrow path.

The light grew dimmer, the air turned colder and the shadows seemed deeper than midnight. The grasp of the forest was immense, the gloom more daunting than a nightmare. Feeling throbbing behind his temples, Kilder pressed on, for his worry over Aerie at this point was far stronger than the fear of the grove.

Whispers came on the wind, calling to him, inviting him to enter the deeper shades of the quietly rustling trees. The forest seemed dead with leafless branches bending back and forth like skeletal limbs in a hopeless death struggle, but at the same time it was more alive than any other cluster of woods he had ever experienced. Invading his consciousness, finding cracks in his stern mind, the whispers became more demanding as he hurried further down the trail.

Unnatural coldness struck against Kilder's body, giving him involuntary shivers while the pearls of sweat upon his face felt suffocating. The pounding urge to turn around and run away was nearly overwhelming, but that was not an option anymore as the path he had followed was no longer there. Only one way remained, and it led him deeper into the heart of the grove.

"Aerie!" he yelled, listening carefully, but the only response he got was more intangible whispers like chatter among the trees, but he could not quite make out the words.

The shadows moved. He was sure of it, yet he could not pinpoint a single movement as they stubbornly remained in the far corner of his eye, leaving him second-guessing everything he saw and heard.

Berry barked bravely, but the striking gloom ate at her, turning her encouraging barks into frightened whine. Unable to understand the reason for her growing anxiety, the first instinct for the hound was to cower and hide. Only her loyalty and affection for the family kept her doing what she did best. Aerie's familiar scent was like a string leading the hound through what had become a labyrinth of barely visible pathways amid the thickets. It was something even the shadows of the grove could not suppress.

High above, the slivers of sky turned dark, revealing the stars that resembled faint candles flickering against the dark veil. Nightfall was upon them.

"Aerie!" Kilder continued calling, growing more desperate with each try. But then, a sudden, unexpected response made his heart skip a beat.

"Dad?" a weak voice answered from the darkness.

"Aerie!" he cried, a wave of relief surging over him. "Berry, find Aerie! Find her!" he urged, and Berry took off, leading him through the twisting trees with incredible precision.

They came to a small clearing, surrounded with some of the tallest trees he had seen in his life. Looking older than the world itself, the trees had large gnarls growing on their sides, shaped confusingly as bodies of people, a detail Kilder found himself staring at even in the middle of his joy. The trunks had sap running along their rough bark, dried ages ago. In the growing darkness, it appeared as if the trees were bleeding.

"Aerie, come away from there!" Kilder said with his voice tightened as he saw his daughter studying the trees with keen interest.

Berry barked her warnings, sensing something sinister creeping closer.

"Dad, these trees have people under the bark," she said, running her little hand over the disturbingly distinct features.

Peering around restlessly, Kilder wanted to get out as fast as possible, but then he noticed something on the ground that was more than a twig fallen from the trees. Picking it up carefully, he gazed upon a staff, very similar to those used by the wanderers and hikers alike, except this one was exquisite. The head had a small crystal mounted on it with extremely thin glyphs carved on the surface, looking like spider's web laid on it with skill he could not comprehend.

Enthralled by his discovery, it took Kilder a while to realize that his daughter was talking, and that she was not talking to him. She was talking to the tree, or so it appeared at first. Upon closer glance, Kilder saw to who she was speaking, and it chilled him to the bone. Aerie had scraped off some of the bark and revealed a partial face— an actual face of an elder man. Pale like death itself, the man looked at them with eyes that held no hope.

"You must leave..." he sighed weakly, voice almost too thin to be heard.

"Who are you?" Aerie wondered curiously, trying to scrape more bark off as if attempting to free him, but they were too late to help the poor man.

"Take my staff and follow the star. Make your way out before he comes," he struggled with every word, then closing his eyes, he said a few words in a language neither could understand.

As a result of his brief chant, the crystal on the staff began to glow softly, breaking the darkness around them, revealing moving shadows everywhere.

"Come, Aerie, we must go— now!" Kilder rushed loudly, grabbing her hand firmly and pulling her away from the dying man.

Berry barked at the approaching forms with her tail between the legs, showing the extent of her fear. Her bravery in such distress was unmatched.

Follow the star, the words lingered for a while before their meaning became clear.

"The star of Avareth," Kilder muttered excitedly, scanning the night sky, whatever he could see through the hanging boughs. There was the star— the star that never moved. It would show them the way out.

But then hope faded as the whispers made their way through his mental defenses and began to gnaw at his very soul.

"Dad, you're hurting me," Aerie cried, but Kilder did not hear her anguish. He was hesitating, suddenly unsure of his own intentions. A strange shift happened, blurring the harsh reality with comforting darkness. Feeling enlightened, Kilder saw a better way.

The whispers in his head, previously demanding, were now less threatening— alluring. The shadows felt less daunting. He could not understand what was happening, but the soothing feeling and the receding terror were most welcome for his pounding heart. The shadows came closer, trees that used their roots to slither across the clearing like upright serpents, reaching for him with their creeping sprigs.

"It's all right, my sweet child," he said with strangely emotionless voice, gazing at the walking trees. "They will not hurt us; they will help us."

Aerie tried to wiggle her hand free, but Kilder's grip tightened the more she struggled, and eventually, she had to admit defeat as pain squeezed tears out, forming burning streams upon her cheeks.

"Please, dad, I'm ready to go now," she begged, hoping to get through whatever had so suddenly turned her father into something she could not recognize.

Berry made some false attacks toward the creeping horrors, but even her courage was finding its limits. Retreating behind Aerie's back, she whimpered fearfully.

"Listen to the grove, my child," Kilder said calmly, colorlessly, tilting his head slightly to hear, to enjoy the message. "It's calling to us," he then said, turning back toward the heart.

"Run, child," the old man wheezed, struggling to breathe. "Your father is hearing the voice of the Treetender— the grove has him now."

His time was almost spent, but his words were enough to trigger Aerie into more aggressive resistance. While Kilder listened absent-mindedly, a faint, joyful smile upon his face, Aerie grabbed the staff from his hand and swung it at his face.

The surprise of the attack combined with sudden pain made him stumble backward in confusion, losing the tight grip he had on Aerie. Momentarily, the grasp of the grove loosened, allowing the worried, terrified father to gain control of himself.

"Come, Aerie. We must make haste!" He took a step, and Aerie followed eagerly, but the victory was short-lived, for Kilder stumbled and fell without realizing the cause of his clumsiness at first.

The trees were upon them, and one had curled its root around his leg, keeping him from escaping, pulling him toward the trees. Soon a second root shot forward, quickly slithering around his waist, constraining him against the ground. He tried to tear them off with his bare hands, but they resisted his grip. Two more shadows came forward, targeting Aerie with their rustling boughs. Growling, Berry sank her canines into the resilient roots, but failing to do much damage. It did not stop her from trying.

"Run, Aerie," Kilder urged. "Take the staff, take Berry and follow the blue star! Tell your mother that I love her."

"Dad..." Aerie tried to argue, but Kilder interrupted her with an angry gesture.

"There's no time for foolishness, girl! Run as fast as you can! Don't look back!"

Sobbing, unwilling to leave her father behind, Aerie grabbed the staff and slipped away before the trees got close enough. A sharp yelp behind her was a perfect reminder about how short of time she was left. However, Berry's lightning reflexes saved her, and obediently she returned to the fold by her side. The soft light of the crystal revealed the ghostly scenery, pathless and grim. Forcing her fears aside, Aerie crashed through the thickets, ignoring all the obvious ways the grove was offering, dashing forward with her eyes fixed on the star.

The forest came to life. More and more shadows moved toward her, but fear could not break her focus. Keeping her father's words in mind, she was now determined to find a way out.

Close behind her, Berry followed with great confusion. To her, Aerie could have just as well crashed against stone walls as she used her small figure to force her way through the dense growth. The dog remained in her wake, regardless of Aerie's apparent madness, for she sensed the shadows of the grove right behind her tail.

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When Kilder was fully bound by the web of roots, the trees began to move him closer to the dreadful trunks with the eery gnarls reminding about their past victims. Placing his body firmly against one of the massive trees, the walking horrors retreated, but remained close, ensuring he

could not escape. Thick, tar like sap seeped from within the rough bark, attaching his body to the trunk like the strongest glue.

"What happens now?" he asked, his voice strengthless and hollow.

The old man, barely breathing, coughed laboriously before answering. "The tree will hold you, grow around you, slowly crushing every bone in your body as it suffocates you. In short, you'll die a slow, painful death as the tree consumes you," he explained with a thin whisper.

"How long have you been like this?" Kilder asked, hoping death came easy and quick.

The answer did not please him.

"Days— Weeks," he whispered, frowning lightly. "I can't remember anymore."

Trying to calm his racing heart, Kilder focused on his hands and legs, tightly embedded in the now hardened sap. All the angles or force he applied into his wiggling, to cause even a tiny crack that could possibly free one his limbs, were all bound to fail, for the sap held stronger than steel.

It began as an itch, a burning sensation, as the tree bark pierced and tardily began to peel off his skin one inch at a time. In a few days, it would cover him completely, encasing his helpless body to begin the inevitable death clench.

The whispering voices were still haunting him, carried by the everlasting hum of the grove.

"Stop resisting," the old man said after listening to Kilder's painful grunts for a time. "Close your eyes and let the whispers take you away. I do not want to hear your screams anymore. They keep me awake, and I'm so very tired."

"They won't find me— they can't find me," he wailed quietly, ignoring the old man's words amid his pointless struggle.

Feeling the pressure building against his body, Kilder gazed at the old man for a word of encouragement, but he was no longer there. The bark had completely retaken him, and the quiet croaks he had heard while struggling with his own fears were now silenced. The tree oozed a mixture of sap and blood as it feasted on the corpse inside.

Finally heeding the advice, he closed his eyes, a massive wave of despair washing over his entangled mind. Kilder tried to pray, but the fleeting words prevented anything comprehensible from departing his lips. Just foggy excerpts, fragments of prayers that, in the end, made absolutely no sense.

Surrendering to the voices, accepting his fate, Kilder heard the call of the Treetender. A figure moved in the shadows, a figure clad in a cloak of thorns, approaching. Unsure whether it was a dream or reality, he opened his mind to the nightmare. The flashes of pain receded, despair was swept away by solace, and somewhere in the depths of his slumbering mind, he heard a faint echo

of Berry barking. The sound held no fear, but sheer excitement. Too tired to open his eyes and see, Kilder nestled against the darkness, finding peace that allowed him to sleep.

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Legs scratched, bleeding, Aerie pushed through the rustling, blinding thickets. In a wild, panicky rush, her feet got tangled in the undergrowth, repeatedly making her to struggle with balance. If that was to happen, if she fell, she knew there would not be another chance. The extending boughs lashed on her back like whips, painfully tearing through her clothes and ripping her skin, violently pushing her forward and causing her to lurch.

They were trying to make her stumble and fall.

The gathering clouds made her blue star of hope to disappear from time to time. Praying to reach the edge of the grove before it would vanish completely, Aerie squeezed the enchanted staff in her hand like her life depended on it while pushing her muscles to the limit in order to maintain her inevitably shrinking lead. Tears blurred her vision, so when she saw a luster of light somewhere among the distant branches, she thought it was her mind playing wicked tricks. Swiftly wiping her eyes, she looked again and it was still there. Exhilarated by the sight, a wild hope suddenly bursting in her chest, Aerie leaped over the remaining bushes like a dashing deer.

"Aerie! Kilder!" a holler sounded behind the last of the branches.

Berry barked excitedly, taking off and easily passing Aerie as she sprinted toward the familiar voice.

"Dalthor!" she screamed, finding new strength from within. "Dalthor, I'm here!" she yelled again, receiving a response much closer.

"Aerie! Aerie, come home!" her brother called as she finally appeared from the darkness.

The candles on the porch, the remaining stars still unveiled by the clouds, the torch her brother was holding, they all seemed brighter than the sun after what had felt like gloom eternal.

Halting by the fence, seeing the familiar figure of her brother running toward her, Aerie cried in joy and sadness, yet something seemed terribly out of place. Dalthor reached out for the dog, who was happily running toward him with tail wagging, but as she got close enough, Berry stopped so suddenly her paws kept sliding on the wet grass. Revealing her teeth, the loyal hound growled at him.

The scenery became a blur. The lights faded and the ground itself took on a different shape as wildly lashing roots appeared from the wavering, festering dirt. Berry's growl turned into panicky yelp as thorns pierced her body— thorns that grew out of Dalthor's hands.

The hound's lifeless body fell to the feet of a man clad in thorns— the master of the grove. Aerie stared at the shifting view, too shocked to move or make a sound.

Aerie, come home! she heard her brother still calling inside her head, but the voice had changed. It was not her brother— it was the grove. With dying hope, too numb to fight any longer, she watched the trees approaching from every direction.

The End