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THE WITCHING HOUR

“At the very beginning of time a new world came into being,” Podcaster was explaining to his children, “And it was hoped that its population would live in peace and harmony; but the Creators soon realised that this was not to be. Most people were good and considerate; however, a smaller number of others known as the Spraits seemed to delight in causing havoc and misery for everyone else. It was decided to grant a few of the good people, like your mother and me, the power of witchcraft with which we might control the wicked ones; and we did eventually manage to drive them through a cave to the land beyond. Unfortunately, the Spraits kept returning; so the Creators formed a barrier between us and them...”

“...Across the cave entrance at the edge of the Mystical Glade,” commented his son, Graineez.

“Called that,” his father continued, “Because of the monolith, a carved stone pillar that they placed in the centre of the clearing facing the cave...”

“...With a crystal orb on top that glows keeping the barrier closed,” added Rozitoza, Podcaster’s daughter.

“Except it still opens on one day of the year,” put in Graineez. The children knew all this, having been told the same story every year; but they never minded, seeing as it was a really good tale.

“That’s when the orb loses its power and has to re-charge,” said Podcaster, “Starting at The Witching Hour when the clock strikes thirteen. And as it does,” explained the warlock. “A portal suddenly appears in the barrier...”

“...And the Spraits will try to come through,” the girl interrupted again excitedly.

“Then all you warlocks and witches go to chant and caper and cavort to hold the Spraits at bay until the portal closes again,” said Graineez. “I bet that’s fun, but you never let us be there to see it,” the boy said in a pleading tone.

“You are still too young,” said Podcaster, “And you know if the Spraits see any children they will catch and carry them away.”

“But we haven’t done them any harm, so why us?” queried Rozitoza.

“No-one truly knows,” said their mother Incantia, casting a concerned glance at her husband, “But some were taken two years ago and they never returned.”

With a sigh of finality, Podcaster declared: “That’s enough for now. Say goodnight and off to bed the pair of you. Your mother and I have to prepare for The Witching Hour.”

The children did as they were told and went to their rooms. Well, actually they stayed together in Rozitoza’s talking for a bit. “It’s always: *you’re still too young* and *maybe next year*,” complained the girl. “We’ll never get to go.”

“You’re right,” said Graineez, “And we’ll miss out on all the fun. I’d love to be in the Mystical Glade to see the portal open; and we could do like the witches and warlocks, capering and cavorting, whatever they are.”

"Some kind of dancing I imagine," suggested his sister. "We won't know until we see it."

"And that won't happen because we aren't even allowed out on the night of The Witching Hour until we grow up," moaned Graineez.

"I suppose it is only one night in the year," said Rozitoza trying to lighten the mood.

"Yes, but *what* a night," said Graineez with a heavy sigh as he headed off towards his own room. He only got as far as the door when he paused and turned. "I've been thinking - all of the warlocks and witches dress up in costumes and masks for The Witching Hour. Once Mother and Father have gone, we could borrow a couple of their costumes and masks; then we can leave the house and no-one will recognize us."

"That's pretty sneaky," said Rozitoza, and a big grin crept across her face. "But I like it."

The pair waited until they were sure their parents were unlikely to return before going to the adult's dressing room. They had barely started sorting through the costumes and masks when they heard the front door open. Quickly ducking back into the main room they were only just in time, because in came their grandmother, Megranni. She was old and rarely performed witchcraft now; but she was very wise and knew things that not many did; so when she spoke, everyone took notice. She paused for a moment and peered over her spectacles to frown at the youngsters. "What naughtiness are you two plotting?" she grated in her crackly voice. "And don't say nothing." She pointed an accusing finger at them. "I can see it on your faces. If you're thinking of dressing up so that you can go outside tonight, here's something that might change your minds. The Spraits will know you are only children because, costumes or not, you are still small. And when they take you to back through the portal to their festering land, do you know what they will do to you?"

"Um... no, Grandmother," mumbled Rozitoza sheepishly. "What will they do?"

"They will give you to Uscargo."

"U-Uscargo," stammered Graineez, "Who's that?"

"Not really a *who*," said Megranni with a wicked smile. "Uscargo is a *WHAT*, a fearful monster they have to keep chained up because he has a bad temper, and when he gets cross he destroys things. He also has a liking for children."

"Well, if he likes children," said Rozitoza, "He can't be all bad."

"More bad than you can imagine, my dears," said their grandmother. "What he likes best about children is to *EAT* them!" Megranni seemed delighted when she went on to explain, and as she did the eyes of her grandchildren grew wider with every word. "And not quickly either. He will start on your fingertips, then nibble his way up your hands to your wrists, and next your arms; very, very slowly, mind..."

Their grandmother continued her gruesome explanation of the fate that awaited them should they dare to venture outside during The Witching Hour; and when she finally left, the children were trembling and speechless. Eventually, Graineez said disappointedly: "I guess we'll have to forget about the costumes and stay indoors. Do you think all that stuff about eating children was true?"

Rozitoza shook her head. "Probably just another of Megranni's tall tales. Don't worry about it." She had wandered over to stare into a large stew-pot sitting on a fire pit in the middle of the room; then glanced at an open book on a table beside the pot. Turning a few pages she came across what she hoped to find. "Here's a potion for growing bigger. If we made this and drank it we could be the same size as the adults, then we could go out tonight."

Her brother sauntered over and looked at the page of the spell book. A frown crossed his face. "It's very complicated and there are loads of words I don't understand."

"They're probably ingredients for the potion," suggested Rozitoza.

"But if we don't know what they are, how can we brew the mixture?"

Now it was his sister's turn to frown, but only for a moment. "We've seen Mother putting different things in the pot, but there's always something in it already. It's only like a soup, really

and I'm guessing she uses the same basic stuff for everything and just adds what she needs for a new potion."

Not realising how dangerous it might be, the children set about gathering things to make the growing potion; at least the ones they thought they knew. "I couldn't find a newt," said Graineez, "But I've got a lizard."

"That'll have to do," declared Rozitoza, "And I've got a toad."

"The book said a frog," Graineez reminded her.

"Actually it called for leg of frog. Anyway, I don't fancy cutting off one of the toad's legs – that's cruel."

"So's taking out the eye of a newt, or in this case a lizard," mused the boy. "We could put them in as they are, though. Maybe it won't matter."

Soon the extra things were in the pot, including the toad which swam around quite happily, while the lizard didn't seem to like the soup and climbed onto the toad's back. "Right," said Rozitoza. "Give it a stir and we'll try it." She waited for her brother to finish; then, mug in hand, she dipped it into the liquid and scooped up some of the soup. Raising the mug to her face, she took a sniff. "It smells awful. I'm not sure I can drink this."

"Give it here," said Graineez impatiently. "All you have to do is hold your nose." He did exactly that and took a drink. Clearly the brew tasted revolting and he spat it out. "Yuck! That's terrible!" Taking a moment to recover, he asked: "Well, have I grown?"

Rozitoza rocked her head from side to side as she thought about it, then replied: "I think you might have. You seem to be a bit taller than you were." Her eyes widened. "Yes, you are, and you're still growing. Let me have the mug." Taking it from him she brought it up to her lips and took a sip. "You're right – it does taste gross." Just before drinking she noticed how much taller her brother was, but in a few seconds she had grown to the same size as him. Then they both stopped growing. "We still aren't the same height as grown-ups. We'll have to drink more..." Her head jerked in the direction of the front door. "Someone's coming. Quick – into the dressing room!"

The children's parents were talking as they entered. "If you can collect the switches," said Incantia, "I'll get the potion." While Podcaster gathered up some bunches of twigs with leaves on, his wife took a large urn and lowered it into the crucible. When it was almost full, she withdrew it and wiped liquid from the sides. Remaining out of sight in the dressing room, Rozitoza peeked a look around the doorway, ducking back as her mother turned and spoke to her husband: "Should we check on the children before we leave?"

"They'll probably be asleep by now," said the warlock. "Best not disturb them."

Remaining hidden behind a rack of clothing, the children waited until they heard the door close, and a bit longer just in case. "Phew! Lucky they didn't go to our bedrooms," said Graineez. "Now let's have some more of that horrible mixture. When we're as big as grown-ups we can choose our costumes and masks."

"I've been thinking about the brew," said Rozitoza, "I saw Mother taking some of it from the pot. Maybe it's for the ceremony to banish the Spraits. What if we've messed up the potion with the bits and pieces we added?"

"Too late now if we have," said her brother. "The only way to find out is to drink a bit more and grow up so we can join the parade..."

It turned out to be even better than the children had expected. The entire coven was assembled in the street, witches and warlocks decked out in their brightly coloured costumes. The masks were amazing: an assortment of animal's and bird's heads with the odd scary, demon-like faces. Graineez and Rositoza shuffled their way into the line, and when it began to move off they noticed most were jiggling and skipping, so they followed suit. The procession made its way out of the village and into the forest along a narrow path through the trees which led to a clearing. In the centre of the open area sat a tall rock, a monolith carved with strange

images and patterns. On top of this was a large glass ball, inside which swirled a purple mist that sparked and glowed.

"This must be the Mystical Glade," said Rozitoza.

"Shush!" warned her brother. "We may look like grown-ups, but our voices are the same as they always were. Just whisper, or they'll know we're kids."

"Oh, hey," hissed Rozitoza. "They're starting some kind of dance. That must be the cavorting and capering. We'd better do the same."

The people spread out and began dancing around the central monolith in a circle. To one side was their father. As the members of the coven passed him, Podcaster handed each a bundle of sticks, saying: "Take this switch to drive away the Spraits."

"What do we do now?" asked Graineez.

"Grab a bunch of twigs," said his sister, "And wave them around like the others."

It sounded simple enough and there seemed no reason why Podcaster would realise his children were there in the Mystical Glade. Even so, he thought there was something familiar about their costumes and masks. Fortunately for the youngsters, the warlock dismissed the notion because it was time to prepare for the next stage of the ceremony. Incantia approached the monolith and began to empty the contents of the urn she was carrying into a bowl at the foot of the stone column.

A sound echoed round the Mystical Glade, the ringing of a bell. With each chime the glass orb on the monolith glowed brightly for a second; then faded, becoming dimmer as the strokes counted up – three, four, five... The witches and warlocks stopped their prancing to file past the stone column and dipped their switches in the bowl of Incantia's brew. Following this they all gathered at the edge of the glade facing what looked just like the trees and bushes of the forest. Graineez and Rozitoza joined them. The chimes continued to ring out - eight, nine, ten... "What now?" whispered Rozitoza.

...eleven, twelve, thirteen. On the final stroke the light in the glass ball went out completely throwing the Mystical Glade into darkness; but only for a second. Something was happening to the forest; at least a large circle of foliage was beginning to shimmer. It continued to shine brighter by the second until the leaves seemed to disappear leaving behind a hole in the forest wall filled with swirling mist beyond which nothing could be seen. The portal had opened. It was The Witching Hour.

Warlocks and witches shook their bunches of twigs at the circle of mist; and as they did, droplets of brew sprayed the portal; except it wasn't truly Incantia's potion but the mixture her children had made. The coven, of course, didn't know this and began chanting as they always did: "Be gone, Spraits, be gone." They would usually repeat the chanting and spraying as the Spraits neared the portal, and they did for a while; then they just stopped and stared.

"Something's coming," declared Podcaster ominously, "But it doesn't look like Spraits."

It wasn't. The gathering waited as a dark shape approached through the mist, seeming to grow bigger as it came closer. Then strange sounds could be heard: a kind of slurping noise accompanied by the occasional hiss. In moments it broke through the misty veil - the head of a lizard first with eyes that blazed like red-hot coals; then the body of a huge, slimy toad. The head moved slowly from side to side scanning the crowd of people, slender tongue whipping in and out from behind scaly lips. With a loud hiss it spoke: "Who summons Uscargo?"

Incantia was stunned. "None here have summoned you," she said in a wavering voice.

"*Someone* has," growled Uscargo. The creature advanced a few steps. Its head turned, pausing to flick a tongue past the closest witches and warlocks. The tongue backed up and wavered over two individuals. "You!" hissed the beast.

A scowl came over Podcaster's face. Now he was certain that he recognised the costumes. Stepping up to his children, he pulled the masks from their heads. "You were told to stay indoors tonight," he grated.

"And I have a suspicion that you interfered with my potion," said Incantia. "Is that right?"

“Never mind all this,” Uscargo interrupted angrily. He moved to one side, opened his mouth and took a huge bite of a nearby tree. “Tell me what you want, then release me from this summoning. You have interrupted my supper and I am hungry.”

“For our children, I suppose,” said Rozitoza bitterly, “Or have you eaten them already?”

The beast stopped his chewing and spat leaves from his mouth with a splutter. “What? Eat your children? Me? That is disgusting! Who would say such a thing?”

Graineez looked around for Megranni and spotted his grandmother slinking sheepishly towards the back of the crowd. Facing Uscargo again he said: “Does that mean our children are still alive?”

“Only too right,” groaned the beast. “They have been more trouble than my own children, the Spraits; who, when they tired of playing with your children, dumped them on me. They are disobedient, leave mess all over the place and they have been eating me out of swamp and home ever since.”

“Then here is our wish,” said Rozitoza. “Return our children to us.”

Uscargo had taken a bite from another tree and turned towards the portal, chewing as he called out: “Sraits, bring the children.” Facing the gathering again he added: “Only too glad to be rid of them. Now will you release me from this spell?”

“Not until the children are here,” said Graineez with determination.

Uscargo’s lips curled in a sneer and he let out a grumbling hiss. Both Podcaster and Incantia shifted nervously, worried that the beast would be angry and do something terrible. Instead, he managed to stay calm. “They are coming,” he announced. The atmosphere remained tense for a moment longer; then shapes appeared advancing through the mist. It was the children who had been taken by the Spraits, and as they entered the Magical Glade they broke into a run to be greeted joyously by their parents. Uscargo growled: “Now will you lift this curse?”

Incantia regarded her children with stern a face. “Only the summoners can reverse the spell, and that is you who interfered with the potion. Each of you must touch Uscargo on the shoulder with your switches – not the leafy end, mind,” she warned, “But the other end with the sticks you are holding in your hands.” She waited, but the children didn’t move. “Do it now!” she hissed impatiently, “Before he gets cross.”

The two youngsters exchanged fearful glances and began edging towards the monstrous beast, ready to break and run if he as much as moved. Uscargo stayed still. Alongside his mouth they felt his breath and almost choked, it was so putrid. Maintaining their cautious plod they passed on to the body. One on each side, they raised the switches to touch the toad’s shoulders with the stick ends; then snatched them away. Nothing happened at first; then Uscargo shuddered and started to shrink, just a little as he began to retreat into the mist.

Everyone in the Mystical Glade breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that all was back to normal; which it was, but not in the way they’d hoped. More shapes could be seen approaching through the mist, and in a moment the Spraits were coming as they usually did. Incantia noticed that some of the witches and warlocks had raised their switches to repel the troublesome Spraits. Desperately, she called out: “No, don’t! If you spray the portal with *this* potion it will only bring Uscargo back!”

“The portal will close soon,” moaned Podcaster. “How can we stop the Spraits entering?”

The answer came from beyond the portal - a deep, echoing, particularly wicked laugh from Uscargo, followed by: “You can’t. You will have to look after *my* children until the portal opens again on the next Witching Hour in a year’s time when I shall come for my Spraits.” He paused and added with another laugh: “If you haven’t eaten them all by then.”

Almost on cue, the glass orb in the centre of the Glade began to pulse with light and the bell rang out. The portal closed gradually as the chimes counted up to fourteen. The only ones who didn’t seem to mind were the Spraits. They were laughing, running around dancing as they imagined what they would soon be doing – trampling flower beds, swinging on clothes lines and

chasing animals. Incantia snarled at her children. "This is what happens when you don't do as you are told. Growing up isn't just about being taller, it is much, much more..." She carried on for a while, even as they were heading home from the Mystical Glade. A little later the children were in bed, hoping that would be an end to it – just a few harsh words.

Next morning their mother announced: "It is time you learned something about witchcraft and that making magic potions is more than just throwing things in a pot." Believing that all was forgiven, the children's faces lit up; only to sadden again when she ordered: "Take the cauldron out and empty your slurry into the garden. You'll need two scrubbing brushes - I don't want it back in the house until it is spotless."

The children did as they were told, grumbling and groaning for a while as they cleaned the big pot. "Maybe it's not all bad," said Rozitoza, "Once we've done this Mother might show us how to make a new potion."

Returning to the house with the exceptionally clean cauldron they waited as Incantia inspected it. "Good," she said. "Now it's time for your next lesson." Unfortunately, it wasn't what they'd been expecting. "If you are to practice witchcraft you need to be more responsible. Your next task is to go and help keep the Spraits from causing trouble."

"*Then* will you teach us how to make potions?" asked Graineez.

"Not immediately," said their father. "Remember - the Spraits will be with us until the next Witching Hour."

"But that's a whole year!" whined Rozitoza. "Is that how long we've got to wait to learn about witchcraft?"

"Perhaps even longer," said Podcaster with a grin. "There's something else you'll have to do before you are taught the magical arts. I think you might know what I mean."

The children rolled their eyes and said together: "Grow up."

Incantia chuckled. "How did you guess?"