

Grembus Awake

The town of Lifestone is besieged by a mysterious plant called Shadevine, which makes everyone in the town despair, including the town hero General Grembus and his lovely wife Eallieni. After they have terrible fight they disappear, leaving their children, Zoey and Eaden figure out the mystery how to rid Lifestone of Shadevine's terrible curse, and restore their lives.

A pinecone hit Zoey Hacksill in the back of her head. She sighed loudly. It was bad enough she had to chop Shadevine again from the fence around the village's community farm. Adding an annoying little brother to the mix was unacceptable.

“Not now, Eaden. Try it again, and you will not like the response,” she yelled up at the sky. She knew only that he was above her somewhere. The boy climbed anything and everything, and was, on occasion, found sleeping in a tree or on a roof.

Zoey pulled and cut at the Shadevine, which was twisted inside the fence and wrapped around the chicken coop. This farm was like any other in the town of Lifestone - covered in Shadevine.

Another pinecone whizzed past her, but this time Zoey was ready. She wheeled around, fluidly drew her slingshot, and launched a rock straight over her brother's head.

“The next one won't miss, you little troll. Now get out off of that roof and go home!”

“I can't. Mom and Dad are fighting again,” Eaden said quietly.

Again? Zoey couldn't believe it. Her parents never used to fight. The elders said it was because of the Shadevine, that it had some terrible hold on the town, but that sounded silly.

Zoey's father was General Grembus, a retired war hero, known across the entire land for his feats of bravery in the Barbarian Wars decades ago. Her mother, who went only by her first name Eallieni, Grembus had met on his last tour of duty, in a distant land. He had always said he knew he wanted to marry her the first time he set eyes on her. Everything about her was beautiful - her skin seemed to not merely reflect light but augment it. Her hair was long and golden, her eyes a dark green, so piercing that strangers found it difficult to meet her gaze for very long.

Zoey decided it was time to go home. The Shadevine would have to wait for tomorrow.

She heard the screams before she even saw their home. Once there, she stood in front, listening, holding Eaden's hand tightly. It was quiet, but as they approached their front door, a piercing scream caused them both to jump. It was followed by the shattering of glass. Zoey bolted, yanking her brother's arm in flight. He protested a bit, but even the young boy could sense the danger.

They fled to their grandmother's home across town in the older section of the village of Lifestone. Little did Zoey know she'd never see her parents after that night. When asked, Grandma never said exactly what had happened; no one did. Rumor was that her parents fled the home after their fight. Others said darker things, things that Zoey would not accept.

Grembus was Grandma's son, and Zoey could tell that she missed him. It seemed to her that the whole town despaired. After Grembus and Eallieni vanished, some suspected the Shadevine had something to do with it, but no one could say how. After nearly a month at Grandma's house, Zoey decided that enough was enough. She was going to run away and find her father.

One afternoon when Grandma napped and Eaden was out climbing around town somewhere, Zoey made her move. As she made her way to the Alwood Forest, she started remembering all of the scary stories and legends about the Alwood Forest. She shook off the fear and picked up her pace.

The Alwood Forest was as creepy as Zoey had feared. It wasn't long before she could barely see the path, and fear found her again. She rested on a tree and wept. A young girl in the woods looking for her parents. Was she mad?

Zoey snapped out of it upon hearing a rustling in the trees. Then, something zipped past her head, followed by a familiar giggle.

"Eaden?" she asked. Scanning the canopy, she found him, standing on a branch directly above her. "Eaden! Why are you following me? Go back to Grandma's!" Zoey protested but inside was glad to see her little brother, who always seemed to make things brighter.

"No way, not without you sis. Why did you run away?"

"I need to find Mom and Dad," Zoey explained, and yet Eaden seemed happy to just be with her. They journeyed together for some time, with only the sound of Eaden's singing accompanying them. She marveled at his pure nature. That was until another pinecone nearly hit her. She turned her head up to yell at him, but instead tripped over a mossy mound, landing on it. Eaden laughed, but Zoey didn't, because the mound grunted, and moved. She drew her slingshot as Eaden dodged behind her.

The stone was actually a forest creature, about as big as a racoon. Jet black hair burst out around his filthy leather jacket and pants. He had a massive nose and extremely deep folds in his mustard-colored face. His ears were the size of dinner plates, and his legs short, ending in hairy bare feet.

"Put that weapon away! What are you children doing in the Forest? You know that human folk cannot pass through these forests safely," he said in a surprisingly deep voice for his size.

"What *are* you?" said Eaden, reaching his hand out to touch his enormous nose.

The creature backed away from the boy's finger. "Hmphh, what am I? I'm a gnome of course," he said, spit flying from his mouth. "I am Salizine Francis Interweld the Third. You can call me Sal for short, but none of that matters because you're not staying in this forest."

"But Mr. Sal, we are desperate. The town has been surrounded by Shadevine and there is nowhere to go. The people despair." Zoey said.

"Despair they should," he said, peering at the darkening sky. "All right. Come now, follow me. It's getting dark."

The gnome waddled through the duff, grumping to himself throughout the walk, which terminated at a massive oak tree. He waved his hand gracefully and a door appeared and then opened.

“Woahhh,” said Eaden, his mouth gaping.

Once inside, Zoey couldn't believe how spacious Sal's home was. Her eyes fell upon a small rock with a simmering pot on it. There was no fire, its heat coming from within it. Sal caught her eyes, and shook his head. He commenced to fetch the children soup in what appeared to be small coconut shells, mumbling to himself the entire time.

“Mr. Sal, why do you say the people should despair?” Zoey asked as she finished her delicious, peppery onion soup.

“Shadevine, of course. Forest-kind warned the humans when it started appearing, but they ignored us. It is a plant that is not of this world.”

“How can a plant grow like it does?”

“It is believed that it thrives where the hope of people has turned to despair and pessimism. It's not of this world; it is made of a dark magic that compels those who touch it to despair ever more.”

“Can nothing be done?”

“Well, not by you. You're both too little and frail for the task.”

“What task?”

“There is a man named Grembus Hacksill. His spirit has failed, and the weight of his sorrow and pessimism fuels the Shadevine's rapid spread. Any who approach him are chased away, if they avoid the swing of his mighty hammer.”

Zoey smiled and looked at Eaden who was playing with the various knick-knacks in the gnome's unusual home. She stood and grabbed her brother's hand. “How terribly rude of me! I have not introduced us properly. My name is Zoey, and he is Eaden, of the Hacksill house.”

The gnome's eyes grew wide, exposing the beautiful amber color of his eyes. “You are Hacksills?”

She nodded proudly.

The gnome jumped up and ran into the back area of his room, returning with an ornate brass amulet.

“This is the Eye of Vigor. It is tied to the life energy of this town,” the gnome said while slowly opening it. “As you can see, the eye closes.”

Inside the amulet was a beautiful, ethereal eye, the center blue like the ocean. It looked as if it were sleepy, more than two-thirds closed.

“When the eye fully closes, there will be no return for the people of Lifestone. You must take this amulet to your father. Open it before him, or touch it to his skin, and he will return to you.”

“Should we go now?”

“No. Rest first, and head out in the morning, for the forest is not safe at night.”

As they were leaving the next morning, Sal grabbed Zoey’s arm gently, pulling her aside.

“My dear, be careful.”

“Are there monsters on the way?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s your father. He is not the man you remember.”

Zoey didn’t know what to say. She nodded and started down path, using the directions Sal had provided.

After nearly an hour walk, the children came upon an ancient castle. This was where they would find their father. The castle was nearly rubble above ground. Zoey made her way down to the lower levels carefully; Eaden jumped from one corrupted parapet to another, then to a crumbling wall, then to a stairwell that spiraled down.

Shadevine grew thicker as they descended, strangling the ancient marble pillars, covering the walls and floors, hiding almost all of the alabaster. In the lowest level there was a prison, with an array of cells that stretched on. In the last cell sat Grembus Hacksill.

“Father, it is me, Zoey,” she called out, standing just outside the cell’s corroded gate. She and Eaden crept towards him. He barely resembled her father – he was thin and ragged, and his face had a ferocity of a wild animal. Around his head was a wreath, with green vines and black leaves -- Shadevine. His giant war hammer sat on the table. He did not smile as he looked up.

“Why are you here?” he asked, his voice a deep growl.

“We came...to help you,” Zoey said, her voice trembling.

“And to give you hugs!” burst Eaden, who started towards him.

“No! Stop!” he bellowed, standing up.

Eaden dashed behind his sister.

“I do not need your help, pity, or hugs. I need to be left alone.”

“But father, we have something that might--”

“I said NO!” he screamed, and stood, his bulk blocking out the light. He picked up his war hammer and smashed the table in front of him with one mighty swing.

“Leave me be! I have come here to die, but even Death refuses me. I do not eat or drink, and yet I live. I am the King of Failure! Have you not seen my crown?”

He picked up the war hammer again, and pointing it at his daughter, he said, in a low voice, “Go.”

Zoey had never been so afraid. She picked up the amulet from her chest and opened it. The eye was nearly closed.

“No! I will not leave! People need you! We need you...I need you,” she wept.

Madness crossed the general’s eyes. He started to swing the hammer. Zoey thrust the amulet towards her father. The blue light of the amulet illuminated her father’s face, and as its light danced in his eyes, his rage melted like snow in the spring.

He picked up the amulet from her, closed the cover, and pressed it onto his forehead. The crown of Shadevine disintegrated.

“My brave Zoey, I’m heartbroken for what I put you through. I don’t know what had come over me.”

“It was the Shadevine, Father! It’s evil and wicked,” Zoey said.

“The evil is within, my dear. Shadevine only exposed it,” Grembus responded, his eyes full of tears.

They hugged for what felt like the first time in forever.

He rose quickly. “Children, we must hurry.”

“Why?” Zoey asked.

“It is not me who fuels the magic of this amulet, but your mother.”

They moved quickly back towards the outskirts of Lifestone. Her father stopped in front of a tree, which at first confused Zoey. She gasped when she saw it -- a faint outline of her mother melded with the elm tree. Flesh had melded with wood, hair with leaves, and bone with root.

Grembus knelt before the mighty tree. He grabbed the amulet, and opened it. The blue light shone on where her face was, but there was no reaction. No melting. Nothing.

“We are too late,” Grembus whispered.

“Up here!” Eaden called from a branch above. Zoey looked up and couldn’t believe what she saw. A human hand, growing from a branch, was holding his hand.

Grembus instantly hurled the amulet up toward his son. The throw was on target, but the boy was unable to disengage quickly enough from his mother’s hand. The amulet fell landing in a bush some fifty feet away.

Zoey retrieved it quickly, but looked up and saw that her mother’s hand was now wooden.

Her father opened the amulet. The eye was closed. Zoey then saw her brother fly through tree faster than she had ever seen him move. She saw his target -- mother’s other hand. She

grabbed the amulet from his hands, whipped out her sling shot, and let it fly with all of her might and will. A scream left her lungs as the metal sang through the air.

By less than an inch, the amulet sailed past Zoey's mother's final vestige of humanity. But just then, Eaden leapt, caught the chain, and, with one hand, held onto the branch, and with the other, the amulet.

Eaden pushed it into the branch that was his mother's hand.

Nothing happened, as he dangled from the tree.

"Help me!" he screamed.

Grembus and Zoey ran to him, but the Shadevine started to grow up around their legs. Grembus hacked at the vine with a knife, furiously, viciously, but it grew on them both.

Zoey heard her brother scream, and spun around, expecting the worst, instead she saw her brother dangling from the tree, held by a human hand. A silent tension rose, as if the air had frozen. The next instant was an explosion of green so intense Zoey thought the entire forest had blown up.

When Zoey opened her eyes, she saw her mother holding her son in her arms. She was wearing the same green dress as on the day Zoey last saw her a month ago.

Grembus walked to her with purpose, and they kissed a long, tearful kiss.

As they walked back toward the town, Grembus spoke quietly and mournfully to his beloved, words of apology, of fault, of regret. Eallieni spoke of sorrow that she hadn't been able to help him, that she had eventually fallen victim to the pessimism and despair that Shadevine brought to Lifestone. With every sentence they spoke, and every step they made through Lifestone, Shadevine withered into dust forever.