

# SPELLHOLLOW WOOD

from *“The Cycles of Exile”*

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*Chapter 1*

**Taken Away**

**S**he defiantly rubbed the fist of dirt she was holding into her mother's nose and mouth—punctuated a moment later with a hard slap across the face. Ten year old Marie Meehanan had always been the most loving and respectful daughter— until now.

It was the end of a summer day, right before dusk. Both the setting sun and a full rising moon shared the sky above a precipitous rock ledge. This was a special place, which her father, James, took the three of them fairly often. From their vantage, one had a clear view both west and south, revealing the expanse of land for a hundred miles. On especially clear nights some claimed they were able to see the lights of New York City, away southeast.

Mother and daughter now gaped at each another in disbelief— Marie for having dealt the blow, her mother, Anna, for having received it.

It had begun only minutes before with Marie fitfully fidgeting in her mother's arms, clearly not wanting to be there. James sat next to them as his daughter began to groan and whine.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" asked Anna Meehanan. "We have a wonderful sun and moon to watch tonight."

"I'm sick of this place," answered Marie, "I want to go." She continued struggling against her mother's embrace.

"You love this place," said her mother.

She did. Upon this ledge as a child, Marie would gaze into the heavens at day's end, asking them endless questions about the moon and the stars. Her father explained the science of astronomy, her mother, the myth and romance of the night sky.

Anna glanced at her husband. He hunched his shoulders.

"It's no big deal for her tonight, I guess."

"That's right," Marie shot back, as her mother let go of her. Marie abruptly stepped away, stooping to pick up a stone. "I want to go home."

“Let daddy and I watch the sunset,” answered her mother. “Then we’ll go.” James and Anna huddled together as the sun shone upon their faces.

With a sharp scowl, Marie threw the stone from the ledge. For some reason she could not understand, she was feeling very angry and even more anxious. She picked up a fallen tree branch and began banging it against a large rock along a wall of the ledge. Harder and harder she slammed the branch, grunting as she continued.

“Stop that, Emily,” said Anna. “What are you doing?” Her first name was Emily, but she was known to almost everyone by Marie, her middle name. Everyone, that is, except her mother.

“I want to go home now,” Marie bellowed.

She halted a moment, grabbed some dirt from the ground and spitefully rubbed it all over her own face and neck. She then picked up another branch, wielding one in each hand and began wildly smashing both against the rock. Her parents sprang to their feet. Anna grabbed Marie as her father took the branches from her hands.

“What’s wrong, Emily!” said her mother as she tried to calm her daughter by embracing her. That’s when Marie bent again, scooped up some more dirt and shoved it straight into her mother’s face.

Anna spluttered on the soil in her mouth. Before she could wipe it away, Marie lashed out and slapped her mother, leaving a red blotch on her jaw.

“Take me home now, right now!” shouted Marie.

And then, on this clear night, something else began happening. An unexpected fog rolled in. It quickly expanded and grew thick all around them. Within hardly a minute it became so dense they could not see more than a few feet in front of them.

James made them huddle close, not daring to trust moving blind among the sharp fall-off of the ledge’s boundaries. A harsh, terrible odor overcame them, followed by a distinct sound, as if something—an animal perhaps— were choking. Marie’s eyes darted all around, seeing the sudden panic in her mother’s eyes. Anna seemed to somehow understand what was happening. In response, she quickly reached for something from around her neck. Marie began crying out loud. This fog, in some unexplainable way was horribly familiar to her.

“I told you I wanted to go home, why didn’t you listen!”

“We’ll be fine, Marie, just calm down,” assured her father, standing over them in protection, his eyes trying to penetrate the fog. The strange noise came closer, now

discernible not as choking sounds, but that of something with a horribly strained breathing pattern.

Anna drew out in front of her a small round globe on a necklace. She held it up, where a hint of the rising full moon through the fog somehow caught it, producing within the charm a faint glow. Marie had never seen it before. As the fog tightened around them and the odor and bestial sounds came very close, Anna ripped the necklace off. She placed it in Marie's hand, clasping her fingers tightly around it.

"Emily, take this. Keep it on you and never let it go! It will keep you safe. Please, remember the moonlight!" The globe gleamed brighter in Marie's hand. But in her confusion and hysteria, with the ghastly breathing and disgusting smell overwhelming them, Marie threw the charm far out into the fog.

"No!" cried Anna, watching it disappear. With a heavy sigh of resignation, she wrapped her arms around her daughter, preparing for the worst.

In the next instant as James circled to protect them, a sharp, angered roar pierced their ears. Anna was suddenly, viciously, lurched away from Marie into the fog. But her mother's clutching hands would not let go and Marie was dragged along. With a scream, Marie saw her mother dangling on the ledge brink, seized by something in the hazy mist— something with terrible, red dripping eyes staring back. Ten year old Marie was struck with a pang of recognition: she vaguely knew what stared at her, from perhaps a dream or imagining a story once told to her, or something. She also knew she hated it and being near it made her hate everything as well. It motioned for her to follow. Even as her mother's desperate outstretched grasp was slipping from her, Marie suddenly felt her father grip her shoulders from behind.

"Don't let go of her, Marie!" he shouted, "hold on!"

But instead, intense rage and disgust swelled within Marie. With a feral growl, she wrenched her hands away and kicked her legs downward, smashing into Anna's head. She fully saw the disbelief and betrayal in her mother's eyes, before falling away and disappearing into the fog. James threw himself after his wife, but she was gone. He recovered and stared astonished at Marie.

"What did you do?" he pleaded.

Before she could answer, he took her in his arms and held her from any further harm. A moment later, Anna appeared again, farther away, but somehow still visible through the fog. Marie struggled to get free, but James held her tightly while calling out to his wife again and again. The odor and disgusting sounds then faded and the fog cleared as quickly as it appeared. When they were able to see again, Marie gasped. The spot where they last saw her mother was in mid-air past the brink of the ledge. Had they run out to her, they would have fallen into the ravine below, over sharp, jutting rocks and most likely been killed. Below them, there was no sign of Anna Meehanan anywhere.

James bitterly tried to understand Marie's confusion when she woke the next morning. She listened to the sheriff and his men conduct their investigation, clueless as to why her father was so devastated. When her father thoroughly questioned her, it was plain that Marie had blocked the prior night's horrible incident from her conscious mind. It made some sense, James thought: she had not been herself at all yesterday and now she had no recall of what happened. What she had cold heartedly, savagely done to her mother firmly convinced him that Marie was ill. Throughout the next several weeks, she was sent to three doctors to help regain her memory. Nothing worked, with Marie only growing angry and frustrated. During her evaluations, there came strange moments when she adamantly referred to herself as Charlotte, but this would quickly pass. To her father's horror, Marie soon lost *all* memory of her mother, as if she had never existed. With a stiff upper-lip and never shedding a tear, James had no choice but to mourn to himself the loss of his wife.

Months went by with nothing further discovered. Sheriff Dan Radich, one of Gulliver County's most ardent believers in the local legends, knew what had most likely happened, but nonetheless kept his investigation open until the summer's end. James convinced himself that his wife must have fallen victim to a wild bear attack, though the black bears of the New York State region were seldom so aggressive. Afterwards, he often visited her gravesite, but this was out of respect and for his own peace of mind. James knew she wasn't really there because no trace of her was ever found.

The following year had been a trial for both father and daughter. They often argued and Marie at times caught him drinking scotch. She became more temperamental and disrespectful, and had fallen in with a troublesome group of friends. Twice that year there was a knock at the door with Sheriff Dan handing Marie over, explaining what mischief she had found. James's attempts at discipline did not work well, for Marie possessed a headstrong, iron-willed personality, determined to do things her way. Continued examinations by doctors still provided no clues as to what she suffered from, though James was thankful his daughter showed no more violent behavior.

There were however, things Marie and her father did enjoy together: games, specifically chess, which brought out both their competitive natures. Their games were also excellent outlets for Marie's talents of quick thinking and methodical strategy, skills which James saw blossom in his daughter from an early age. Marie didn't just become a good chess opponent; she became a deftly skilled player. As she approached her teens, she began to capture her father's king considerably more than the reverse, much to his frustration. In somewhat less engaging moments, they also enjoyed watching a weekly teevee show that took place in outer space, with someone who had pointed ears.

Otherwise her father kept to himself, returning home from work and planting himself in front of that same television set, where the evening news chronicled a long, sad war being fought somewhere far away— along with how angry people were in contention over it. Much like the folk in their hometown of Highland Pointe, who also

argued endlessly, not about the war on the tube, but a war that had been brewing there for many years.

Plainly put, the woods they lived near were downright strange and positively dangerous. By that time, the spring of 1968, thirteen-year-old Marie knew all about the fantastic stories of those woods, as it was impossible to prevent the fervent tale spinning from anyone, young or old. The adults of Highland Pointe feverishly discussed each bizarre event (including Anna's disappearance), whether at the market, the beauty salon or church, along with the children, both at school and play.

Yet Marie was a rare child who did not believe what her father referred to as the "fool lipdrabble" of Spellhollow Wood. James was a firm skeptic and he was not alone, being part of the ugly and ever-contested division among the county folk—a division whose only agenda was which side could proclaim the loudest whether or not there were any such thing as ghosts and goblins. It only followed that James' practical sentiments were a direct influence on Marie's thinking. Apart from what she was taught in catechism, Marie only trusted in what she could see and touch, especially if it was outdoors. She adored animals and nature—trees, rocks and creepy-crawly bugs of all kinds—except for worms. Marie was genuinely scared of and hated the slimy, wriggling things. Still, she had spent far more time as a growing toddler collecting endless sticks and leaves, along with generous helpings of dirt—without the worms—while her new toys were left alone and mostly untouched.

From her early childhood, Marie developed an odd foible, less so for what it was, then for what it progressed into. She became deeply entranced by anything of gold, cherishing the very color and shimmer of it. She was often found adorned with her mothers' (who also quite fancied) gold jewelry: rings, bracelets, and other trinkets that Marie would stare and marvel at for hours at a time. While not so strange at first, her fixation significantly deepened as she got older. The grandeur of pure gold set ablaze such a passion and fire in her eyes that at times her parents, and afterwards her father by himself, could have sworn it genuinely hypnotized her.

In the last year, she started painting her finger and toenails gold, which rankled her father considerably. She then demanded to have her ears pierced, so she could wear a pair of gold earrings, unknowingly belonging to her forgotten mother. After James' repeated refusals, Marie at last had them secretly pierced with her friends by a hippiesh pawnshop owner. Soon after, she was caught stealing a gold ankle bracelet from a jewelry store. Both incidents led Marie to another heated argument with her father, resulting in a month's grounding.

However—a breakthrough occurred that spring of her thirteenth year. It was late afternoon and they were in the midst of another hard fought chess game. Just as James was cornering Marie's king with his rook and bishop, she started talking as carefree as one would about the weather.

“I had a dream about mommy last night,” she said, munching on a handful of peanuts from a bowl set between them.

“You did?” answered her father, his strategic concentration broken, trying his best to remain calm while swallowing the lump in his throat.

Marie maneuvered her knight. “She spoke to me.”

“Did she? What did she say?”

“She told me she was so proud of me and how fast her little Charlotte had grown up ... because it’s been so long since she last held me when I was two years old. Your move, dad.”

The name Charlotte again gave James cause for alarm, but he squelched any immediate reaction. “Two years old?” he instead asked, confused.

“Wasn’t I only two when she got sick and died? Fidleedee, move, dad.”

James moved his bishop ahead inattentively, hardly taking his eyes off his daughter. “Is that what mom told you?”

She quickly exploited his mistake. “No, it’s just what I remember. Checkmate.”

## *Chapter 2*

### **A New (and True) Friend**

It was the end of April and Marie had been somewhat happier since the previous summer as her father granted her permission to help out after school at the Mashenburgs' horse farm. Mucking stalls wasn't fun, but Marie delighted in grooming the horses. She fell in love with an Arabian mare and got to ride her twice a week. Yet still, against her father's wishes, Marie continued to haunt around where there was trouble to be had, in particular with three girls who habitually sought mischief. A year or two older than Marie, the girls appeared to admire her, but this was a ruse as they merely wished to make selfish use of Marie's decisive cleverness which none of them could match. Their names were Bettyann, Tilda and Trish.

"The Greenbrook Motel?" said Tilda, the most aggressive of the three. "The place that burned down years ago? Where all those families died?"

"Creepy," added Trish.

"Yeah, but it's rebuilt," explained Bettyann, the heavyset and intimidating ringleader. "New folks are gonna' be moving in next week. It's the perfect place."

"How are we gonna' do this?" asked Marie. "Make ghosts come to life?"

It was Wednesday, a week after Marie recalled having memory of her mother. She now sat with her friends inside an old tree house someone had built long ago in a field near Cricket Park. Outside, the warm air had begun to turn the leaves green. Mayday, May 1 was a week away, which many in town regarded as a date of superstition almost as much as Halloween. They were certain events far stranger than the usual would soon be occurring: And they were seldom disappointed.

"Fruit loop, were you awake during Science today?" answered Bettyann. She was lighting matches, one at a time, flinging them to the tree-house floor, then stepping on them. "The films of those ghost places the teacher showed today has me thinking."

"Man, that was pretty cool," said Trish. "With the lights out, it really looked ... haunted!"

"That's right," said Bettyann, striking a new match, holding it aloft in front of her face. "If we had that projector and the films," she continued excitedly, "just think of the scares we'd get from those new families moving in."

"You mean—point it right into their windows!" said Tilda, catching on. "Wild! They'll already be looking for haunts and stuff in that motel!"

"Oh, dig it!" said Trish with her usual, wholly annoying cackle. Her laughter wilted as a thought occurred. "Wait," she added sheepishly. "How do we get— We'd have to break into the school."

"That's right, dummy," said Bettyann, flicking a burnt out match at Trish. "At night."

“How?” said Trish. “We’ll never get inside.”

“Yeah we can,” interjected Marie. “I can get in, easy.”

The next day, Marie was true to her word. In late afternoon, about an hour before sundown, they stood outside the back of their school. In their hands were some simple tools and a baseball bat.

They all stared into a window’s newly shattered hole Marie had just made. She then slipped a screwdriver through it, motioning at Tilda to whack the screwdriver with a claw hammer. Tilda missed, whacking Marie’s thumb instead.

“Oww!” hissed Marie. “Fidleedee, give me that hammer!”

“Would you stop saying that stupid word!” said Tilda.

Marie grimaced as Trish handed the tool to her. She tapped the screwdriver with the hammer, forcing open the locked latch from inside.

“Even if we get hold of the projector thing,” asked Trish, fearfully peering around them, “we still have to figure out how to use it.”

“That’s why we keep Marie around,” said Bettyann.

“That so,” asked Marie, already annoyed. “Is that the only reason?”

“Isn’t that enough?” answered Tilda sharply. “Finish the job, before you get us caught.”

Marie turned, facing Tilda, who glared back through the habitual hair over her eyes. Marie then searched the faces of her other two friends with the same result. She felt a tingle of anger: the times they had already been caught by the sheriff were because one of them had become careless, not her. For the first time it occurred to Marie that maybe their friendship, if that’s what it ever was, wasn’t quite what she thought.

Then, something caught her eye behind her three phony friends. A sight that forever changed Marie and the course of her reckless life ... .

A tall, gangly girl with jet-black hair and glasses too big for her face sat on her bike watching them. Her oversize spectacles magnified sparkling, green eyes.

Curiously, a wave of calm assurance swept over Marie as she peered at the girl, who quietly stared back at them. That is, until Bettyann, Tilda and Trish turned on her.

“What do you want?” said Bettyann. “Beat it, creep.”

“Scram, you freak,” said Tilda, “or I’ll wrap those dudley-doof glasses around your neck.”

“Yeah, run back to your mother, since your daddy doesn’t want you anymore,” said Trish. It was clear they knew this girl.

But she sat firm, showing no reaction. She appeared about their age, give or take a year.

“What are you doing here?” she said. “Leave the school alone.”

“Don’t tell us what to do, you filthy jerk,” said Tilda.

“If there’s anything resembling a brain inside that Neanderthal skull of yours,” responded the girl, “use it for once in your life. Go home, open a book if anyone in your house owns one, and learn something constructive.”

Bettyann and Tilda looked at each other, unsure what to say. Bettyann clenched her teeth in anger, along with the baseball bat she held. “You got five seconds to start running—”

“—Wait,” said Marie, staring at the spunky new girl. “Who is she?”

“The weirdo who transferred from Woldred a few weeks ago,” answered Trish.

“How come I haven’t seen you in school yet?” asked Tilda. “My mother said you just wander the streets, ‘cause your father is a wife-beatin’ drunk who ran off.”

“It doesn’t matter, Tilda, they’ll send this pantywaist right back to Woldred,” antagonized Bettyann, “with the rest of the dippy’s.”

“Tell me, Tilda,” said the girl with a sting of sarcasm, “How is Jack Salento doing?”

All their eyes shot toward Tilda, whose face tightened, clearly indicating this was uncomfortable subject matter.

“What do you know about him?” she asked, with an audible sizzle in her voice.

“Only what you blab to everyone, and what everyone else talks about,” answered the girl boldly. “But does he even know you exist?”

Tilda stood, fuming, unable to verbalize a response, though it appeared she was also a bit embarrassed. She quickly decided to return the emotional blow. “And what happened to your father? Tell the truth, or are you too ashamed of him?”

The girl bit her lower lip, suppressing some past deep emotion. “He died when I was young,” she said.

“He did not, liar,” said Trish. “I heard he ran off into the woods and never came back.”

“Why don’t you go run off too?” added Bettyann.

“You got no friends here,” said Tilda. “And you never will, so go get lost in Spookyhollow.”

“Shut up, Tilda,” said Marie sharply. “Maybe you should get lost.”

She took a step toward the victimized girl, as if to deflect her friends’ cruel insults. Since the night before, Marie had relapsed into wholly forgetting about her mother once again— leaving her with a muddled sadness, especially after hearing of someone losing a parent.

“Hey, Marie,” said Bettyann, “you can beat it too.”

“And *you* can shut up,” Marie shot back.

Marie further approached the girl, now noticing an oval-shaped scar at the top of her forehead. Something within Marie wanted to reach out to her. “What did happen to your father?” she asked.

“He died in war,” said the girl. “Fighting for what he believed in.”

Marie thought about the war her own father watched every night on the news and how irate it made him.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” consoled Marie. “I never had a mother. My father is all the family I’ve got.”

“Perhaps we understand each other a bit,” said the girl.

“Hey, beanpole,” said Bettyann, “if you tell anyone about this, like the sheriff, I’m gonna find you and bust your head open.”

The girl engaged the kickstand of her bike and got off. She defiantly stepped forward. Bettyann raised her bat. Tilda yanked something from her back pocket. With a flick of her wrist, she revealed a switchblade.

“Just remember something,” said the girl, “you can do whatever you like, but they’re always watching you.”

“Who’s watching?” asked Trish, nervously glancing around.

The nameless girl simply lifted a finger and pointed toward the outskirts of the village and the edge of the woods. “They are. And one day, they’ll get you.”

Tilda’s fingers tensed around her knife. “You are a freak,” she said.

“I challenge each of you to prove how tough you are,” said the girl.

“I’ll prove it right now,” said Tilda, furiously. She came at the girl until they stood face to face. Tilda dangerously stuck the blade of her knife at the girl’s neck. But the girl leaned in yet closer. Both stared long moments into each other’s eyes. Either was not about to back down ... until the bully relented from her adversary’s defiance. Through her disheveled locks of hair, Tilda blinked first.



“Put that down before you hurt yourself,” said the girl. “I *dare you*, right now to go up into the woods with me.” Bettyann and Trish glanced at one another.

“You’re so bent on frightening others,” continued the girl, “to use a tragedy years ago where many people died, to now scare more people. Well let’s see how brave you are. Let’s go into Spellhollow Wood.”

Tilda lowered her knife and stepped back. Marie was stunned, seeing this plucky girl emotionally turn the tables on her cruel friends. She stepped up, grinning. “I’ll go.”

“What are you doing, Marie!” said Trish. “No one goes into Spookyhollow. No one, unless they’re out of their mind.”

Marie stood directly in front of the three nasty girls. She stuck her index finger straight in Bettyann’s face. “Admit it,” she said. “You’re scared stiff!”

“And you’re not?” asked Bettyann.

“Nope,” answered Marie, “My father told me there’s nothing to be scared about the woods anymore than Halloween. It’s just baloney, so let’s go now, all of us!”

“You’re full of it, Marie,” said Tilda. “Everyone knows what happened to your mother a couple years ago. You act like everything’s normal, but it never was and you and your idiot father are living a crazy, fat lie.”

“My mother?” said Marie, oblivious. “Whose mother? What are you talking about?”

“Let them run back home,” said the girl calmly, “while you and I go into the woods.”

Marie walked up to the clever, outspoken girl and extended her hand. Apart from her forehead scar, there was something odd about the girl’s face.

“I’m Marie.”

“My name is Courinn,” answered her new friend.

Marie turned back to face what were now her three opponents. “You’re ridiculous,” she said. “You’re all more scared of the woods than anyone. Well, *fidleedee*, you’re not getting away with this. You either come with us now, or I will tell everyone in school tomorrow how you chickened out!”

This was too much for an overbearing bully like Bettyann to contemplate very long.

“What about stealing the projector and our plan?” she asked.

“I don’t want to do it anymore,” said Marie.

Bettyann took a deep breath. “Okay, Marie. You lead, we’ll go.”

“I’m not going in there!” cried Trish.

“We’ll go together,” said Tilda. “We’ll show both of these morons that—”

“—No way, I WON’T!” shouted Trish. With that, she leapt upon her bicycle and rode

off like mad. After a long moment, the four remaining stared at one another. The sun was beginning to set. The day would soon end.

“One down, four to go,” said Marie.

“There’s not much sun left,” said Bettyann. “Let’s go tomorrow instead.”

“The sooner we start,” said Courinn, “the sooner we’ll come back out and call it a day.”

The four of them got on their bikes, rode out from the schoolyard and headed for the dark edge of the trees. For the very first time in their lives, they were going to enter Spellhollow Wood.

### *Chapter 3*

#### **Remembering the Past**

The woodland trail known as Luck's End Loop was a narrow dirt road leading out from the village of Highland Pointe into the forest. Barely wide enough for a single vehicle, it ran a thirteen mile loop circling the northern then southern banks of Lake Quinowa until it reached the point where it started. As Highland Pointe was surrounded on three sides of the woods, the road was mainly used by the sheriff and his people, offering them a convenient and quick access route when there was some need or trouble that had to be investigated. It was unofficially off limits to anyone else and back in those days it was known to many as the most feared stretch of road in Gulliver County. It was also known as the 'front door' into Spellhollow Wood.

Courinn now excitedly peddled her bike along that same road with Marie just behind. Tilda and Bettyann reluctantly trailed them, casting their eyes up uneasily as the edge of the woods crept closer and closer.

Courinn hit her brakes right where the dirt road plunged into the trees. They all skidded to a stop. Courinn looked back at them. "This is it," she said. "Everyone still in?"

"Yep," said Marie. "It doesn't even look that scary."

Marie underscored an irony about the woods' appearance. As old as it was, with all the commotion about its spookiness and strangeness, from the outside it hardly looked more foreboding than a simple patch of trees between houses. The magic, if it were magic, was that only once you were inside did the woods appear to be another place completely.

"Both of you shut up," said Tilda, the fear in her voice obvious.

"Let's get this over with," said Bettyann.

"In we go," said Courinn. She pulled up on her handlebars, popping a wheelie, then dropped her front wheel as she sped into the woods. Marie followed with a shout of approval. As she passed over the woods' threshold, Marie hadn't a clue how her whole life would soon completely change.

Bettyann and Tilda sourly glanced at each other. They were usually the ones who coerced others to do what they wanted. They were not used to being so easily manipulated. Now they had no choice, school reputations were on the line. Into the woods they rode.

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