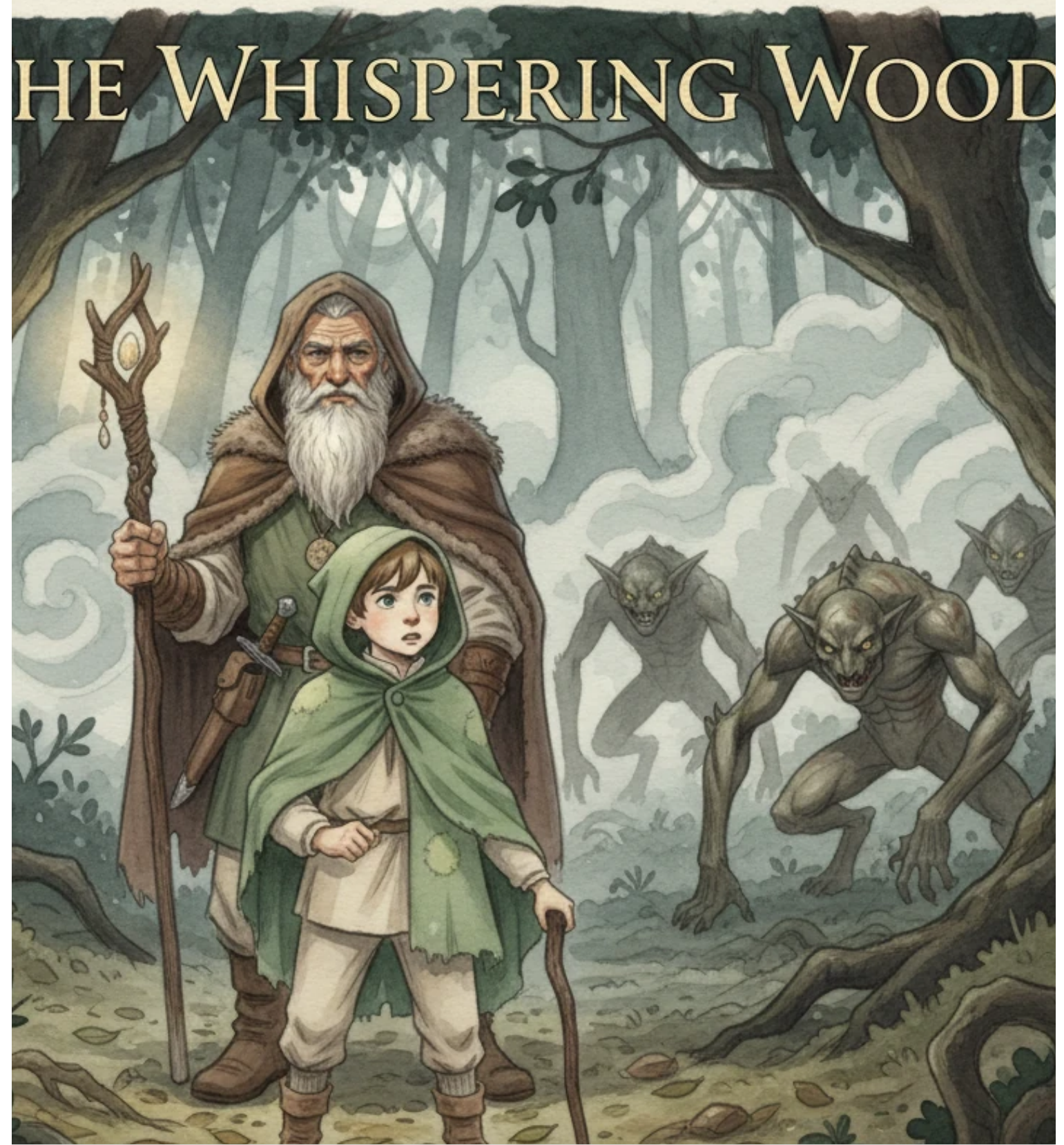


THE WHISPERING WOOD



The Boy in the Green Cloak

Inass Kali

BY ELARA VANCE

LE CHAPERON VERT



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Leo stands at the edge of his village wearing his signature green cloak, a sturdy garment passed down from his grandfather. The morning sun catches the worn texture of the fabric as he prepares for a journey through the woods, feeling the weight of the stories woven into the cloth.

Le Chaperon Rouge



His mother hands him a wicker basket filled with fresh bread and fruit, her expression serious as she gives him her final instructions. She tells him to stay on the path and keep his eyes wide open, reminding him that the forest is a living thing that requires respect and attention.



Deep inside the forest, the sunlight filters through the thick canopy in narrow golden beams, creating dancing patterns on the mossy ground. Leo walks carefully, pausing frequently to listen to the rustle of leaves and the distant call of a bird, sensing the quiet life surrounding him.



From behind the gnarled trunk of an ancient oak tree, a pair of sharp, cunning eyes watches Leo's every step. A shadowy creature stays perfectly still, observing how the boy walks, where he hesitates, and how he stops to listen to the secrets of the woods.



Leo finally reaches his grandfather's small wooden cabin at the edge of the forest, but he stops abruptly when he notices the heavy door is standing slightly ajar. He knows his grandfather always keeps the door locked tight, and a sudden sense of unease washes over him.



Inside the cottage, the air is thick with shadows and an unusual silence that feels heavy and cold. Leo calls out softly for his grandfather, and a strange, gravelly voice answers from the darkness of the bed, beckoning him to come closer into the gloom.



As Leo slowly approaches the bed, he notices the fireplace is cold and the ashes are gray, which is very unusual for his grandfather who never lets the fire die. He catches a faint, wild scent in the air that smells of wet fur and the deep, dark earth of the forest.



Realizing that the figure tucked under the blankets is not his grandfather, Leo takes a slow, careful step back without showing his fear. He notices the large, pointed ears and the way the figure moves, confirming his suspicion that a trap has been set for him.



Leo turns and bolts through the open door, shouting at the top of his lungs for the woodcutters working in the clearing nearby. Behind him, the creature leaps from the bed with a snarl, but the brave woodcutters are already rushing toward the cottage with their axes raised.



After the creature is driven away, the woodcutters find the grandfather safe but locked in the cellar, and the house is soon filled with warmth and light once again. Leo sits quietly by the fire, knowing that it wasn't just his cloak that kept him safe, but his ability to see what others might have ignored.