

A young boy with brown hair, wearing a thick orange sweater and brown corduroy pants, stands in a field of pumpkins at night. He holds a glowing lantern aloft in his right hand. A small, blue, dragon-like creature with large eyes and wings sits on his shoulder. In the background, a cozy house with warm lights inside sits on a hill, surrounded by more pumpkins and trees under a starry night sky with a crescent moon.

The Lantern That Swallowed the Dark



Jack sat on the creaky wooden porch steps of his house, chin in his hands, watching the last orange light of Halloween evening fade behind the old oak trees.

His jack-o'-lantern, which he had carved himself that very morning with a crooked triangle nose, sat cold and dark on the top step — its candle had gone out, and no match in the house would relight it.

Every time Jack struck a match, the flame would sputter, shrink, and vanish as if something invisible were breathing it out.

He noticed, then, something strange: the carved pumpkin's triangular eyes were not dark, exactly — they held a faint shifting glow the color of old gold, pulsing slowly like a sleeping heartbeat.

Jack leaned very close, nose nearly touching the pumpkin's rough orange surface, and whispered, "What are you hiding?"

The glow pulsed once — brighter — and from somewhere deep inside the hollow pumpkin came a single low, resonant sound: a tone like a bell struck underwater.





Jack grabbed the pumpkin with both hands — it was lighter than it should have been, almost hollow as air — and carried it carefully down the porch steps into the yard.

The golden pulse inside beat faster when he stepped onto the grass, as if the pumpkin knew it was moving closer to something it wanted.

A cold wind moved through the bare oak branches, scattering dry brown leaves in a slow spiral around Jack's feet — and then, with a sound like a snapped twig, something landed on the fence post directly in front of him.

It was not a bird.

It was covered in overlapping black scales, had two small curved pewter-colored horns, enormous teal-glowing split-pupil eyes, and a short hooked obsidian beak — and it stared at Jack with the focused, unblinking intensity of something that had been searching for exactly him.

Jack stumbled backward, heart hammering, the pumpkin nearly slipping from his grip as he gasped — he had never in his life seen anything like this creature.

For a long, trembling moment neither of them moved, the pumpkin's glow beating between them like a second heartbeat.





Vornn — for that was the name the creature clicked out in a pattern of short beak-snaps that Jack somehow understood perfectly — did not speak in the way people speak.

He communicated in resonant clicks, low bell-tones, and a vibration Jack could feel in his chest rather than hear with his ears, and these sounds shaped themselves into meaning like words written in warmth.

"The lantern-pumpkin called me," Vornn clicked and hummed, his teal eyes still fixed on the glowing gourd in Jack's arms.

"It is a Harvest Lantern — one of seven that were hidden across this valley long ago to hold back the Hollow Night." Jack tightened his grip on the pumpkin, pulse still quick. "Hold back what?"

Vornn tilted his horned head sharply and explained that on Halloween, when the boundary between the ordinary world and the Hollow Night grew thin as paper, the seven Harvest Lanterns had to be lit — all seven, together — before midnight, or the Hollow Night would seep through and swallow every light, every warmth, every color in the valley for an entire year.

Jack looked at his single, still-dark Harvest Lantern and felt the weight of that word: seven.





Jack made his decision quickly and firmly — the kind of decision that felt less like choosing and more like knowing: he would find all seven Harvest Lanterns and light them before midnight.

Vornn ruffled his scale-wings and clicked a note of reluctant agreement, though he warned Jack that six of the lanterns had been deliberately hidden across Dunmore Valley by something that did not want them found.

"Then we go now," Jack said, and the sureness in his own voice surprised him a little — but he squared his small shoulders and stepped through the wooden gate at the bottom of the yard, the pumpkin lantern tucked under his arm.

The valley beyond the gate looked different at this hour: the familiar fields were draped in silver-blue moonlight and pooled with a low mist that smelled of damp bark and cold apples, and every shadow seemed to breathe.

Vornn glided silently from branch to branch ahead of Jack like a dark compass needle, his teal wing-veins leaving brief ghost-traces in the mist.

Jack noticed, carved faintly into the wooden gatepost he had just passed through, a symbol he had never seen before — seven small circles arranged in the shape of a seed.





Vornn led Jack along a stone-walled path to the edge of a long-abandoned apple orchard, where gnarled trees stood twisted as old fingers and the fallen fruit had turned to dark, soft shapes in the mist.

The first Harvest Lantern was there: a cracked iron lantern identical to the pumpkin in shape but made of tarnished metal, half-buried beneath the roots of the oldest apple tree, sealed shut with a clasp shaped like a crescent moon.

Jack reached for it immediately, but Vornn landed hard on his wrist with a sharp click-warning — the lantern was sealed, and forcing it open would shatter it entirely and make it useless.

"Only the Harvest call opens it," Vornn hummed, which meant the sound, the bell-tone from the pumpkin lantern, had to ring close enough for the sealed lanterns to hear and answer.

Jack held his carved pumpkin directly beside the iron lantern and waited — the golden pulse inside the pumpkin deepened, swelled, and released a clear low bell-tone that rolled outward through the mist like a stone dropped in still water.

With a soft, satisfied click, the crescent-moon clasp released, the iron lantern fell open, and a warm amber flame kindled inside it entirely on its own.



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Two lanterns lit — five to go — and Vorrn guided Jack across the valley at a trot, the iron lantern swinging in Jack's right hand and the pumpkin tucked in the crook of his left arm.

They found the second and third lanterns more easily: one wedged inside the hollow of a fallen elm beside the old mill stream, another resting atop a mossy stone wall at the far edge of the cornfield, both sealed with crescent-moon clasps and both answering the pumpkin's bell-tone with warm flames.

But as Jack bent to retrieve the third lantern from the stone wall, Vorrn went very still — stiff as a carved statue, his teal eyes narrowed to bright slits, his scales pressing flat against his body. Jack froze too.

"What is it?" he breathed.

Vorrn clicked once — very quietly, in the specific low pitch that Jack was learning meant danger — and pointed his horned beak toward the cornfield where something tall and absolutely lightless moved slowly between the dry stalks, darker than the dark around it.

It left no sound, no rustle, no breath — just a moving shape of pure absence that made every lit flame Jack carried shrink inward as if afraid.





Jack made a decision: he would move toward the dark shape and ring the pumpkin's bell-tone at it, believing that light could drive away any shadow.

Vornn clicked rapidly and sharply — no, no, absolutely not — his teal eyes gone wide with what Jack could now read as genuine fear; but Jack was already moving forward between the corn rows, pumpkin outstretched.

He focused all his will and waited for the bell-tone to ring — and it did — but instead of retreating, the dark shape turned fully toward Jack, and the bell-tone choked off as if swallowed, leaving a silence so complete Jack could hear his own pulse.

He ran. Corn stalks whipped at his sleeves as he bolted back through the field, the iron lantern clanging against his hip, until he burst out through the far edge and tumbled onto the grass, gasping.

When he caught his breath and looked at his pumpkin, he understood what Vornn had been trying to warn him about: the golden pulse inside the pumpkin was weaker now — measurably dimmer — and the iron lantern's flame was the smallest Jack had ever seen it.

The dark shape had not been a threat to chase away — it was a drain, and every ring of the bell-tone near it fed it, making it stronger and the lanterns weaker.





Vornn landed beside Jack and, for the first time, the creature did something unexpected: he pressed his scaled head gently against Jack's arm, and a low, sustained hum resonated through his body into Jack's, warm as held breath.

Jack realized this was not just comfort — Vornn was sharing something of himself, a small careful pulse of his own teal light that transferred into the pumpkin and nudged the golden glow back, just slightly, from nearly-gone to dim.

"You gave it some of your own light," Jack said, and Vornn pulled back and clicked a short, quiet note that meant: yes, and I cannot do it again — not until dawn.

There was a cost to Vornn's gift Jack had not seen before: the teal glow in the veins of Vornn's wings was fainter now, and one of the teal lines had gone entirely dark.

Jack felt something shift in his chest — the careless boldness that had sent him charging into the cornfield was replaced by something steadier, heavier, and more careful: he understood now that both of their lights were finite, that the dark shape was drawn to the bell-tone, and that he had to find the remaining four lanterns by going around the creature, not through it.

Vornn tilted his horned head and clicked a third option Jack had not thought of: the symbol on the gatepost — seven circles like a seed — was a map.



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Jack ran back to the gate at the edge of his yard — faster than he had ever run — and crouched before the gatepost in the pale moonlight, studying the seven carved circles.

The circles were not random: each was carved at a slightly different depth, and when he held the dim pumpkin close without ringing its tone, the circles cast seven faint amber shadows that pointed in seven different directions across the valley like compass spokes.

"It's not just a symbol," Jack said quietly, tracing the directions with his finger, "it's where each lantern is hidden — and which order they need to be lit so the path avoids the dark shape."

Vornn clicked an affirmative tone and then, with clear effort and visible discomfort — his scales rippling as if cold — he made his own important decision: he would circle wide to the east and flush the dark shape away from the fourth lantern's location, giving Jack time to reach it and ring the pumpkin's tone just once, quickly, and close the clasp before the shape could return.

Jack looked at Vornn and understood what that circling meant for a creature whose light was already dimmed — it was a brave, costly choice made freely — and he pressed his small palm once, flat, against Vornn's warm scaled side.

Vornn held very still for one breath, then spread his wings and was gone into the dark.



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Jack moved fast and low through the valley, following the fourth amber shadow-spoke across the frost-stiff grass toward the old mill stream where a stone bridge arched over black water.

The fourth lantern was there, sealed in a crack between the bridge's keystone and its arch — and somewhere to the east, Jack could hear Vorrn's bell-tones echoing, deliberate and brave, drawing the dark shape away.

Jack reached into the crack, placed the pumpkin as close as he could, held his breath, and let the bell-tone ring — just once, quickly — and the crescent clasp sprang open and a third warm flame joined the first two.

He followed the remaining shadow-spokes in quick succession: the fifth lantern wedged inside a hollow stone trough near the old well, the sixth hanging from the crossbeam of a ruined barn's open doorway, each one answering the pumpkin's single brief ring before Jack snapped his hands around the clasp and held it firm.

Six lanterns now burned — six small amber stars carried in both arms and tucked under his chin — and the valley around Jack looked warmer and more real than it had an hour ago, as if color and shape were returning to a world that had been going gray.

But the seventh shadow-spoke on the gatepost had pointed toward the center of the valley — directly back toward the cornfield — and Jack knew the dark shape would have returned there now that Vorrn had stopped calling to it.





Vorn glided back to Jack's side, landing on his shoulder with a heaviness Jack could feel — the creature's body was cool now where it had been warm, and only two teal vein-lines remained lit in his wings.

The dark shape had followed Vorn's bell-tones east, but it had also been following the growing warmth of Jack's collected lanterns from a distance, and now it stood at the cornfield's edge again, between Jack and the seventh lantern, fuller and taller than before.

Jack's hands were shaking slightly — not entirely from the cold — as he looked at the shape that swallowed light and remembered how it had choked off the bell-tone and drained the pumpkin when he had tried to go through it.

Vorn clicked a question into Jack's chest: what do you see that the dark shape does not have?

Jack looked carefully — really carefully, the way he'd looked at the pumpkin's faint glow on the porch steps at the very beginning — and he noticed that the dark shape had no shadow of its own.

Everything in the moonlit valley cast a shadow: the bare oak trees, the stone walls, the rusted iron lanterns, even Vorn's small scaled form — but the dark shape cast nothing, because it was not a creature or a force, it was the valley's missing seventh lantern, still unlit, still sealed, trying to find its own way home.



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Jack understood it fully now — understood why the bell-tone had fed the dark shape instead of hurting it, why it had grown larger when he rang the pumpkin nearby, why it circled the lanterns without attacking: the dark shape was the seventh lantern itself, sealed so completely that its own light had turned in on itself, becoming a kind of desperate, consuming darkness.

"It doesn't want to drain us," Jack said quietly to Vorrn, whose teal eyes blinked once in slow, solemn confirmation. "It's calling out the only way it can because it can't open itself."

Vorrn clicked a word Jack had learned meant caution — because this understanding, while true, made the next step more dangerous, not less: approaching the dark shape would still drain any bell-tone Jack rang near it, unless the other six lanterns were close enough to ring their tones simultaneously, surrounding the seventh with more warmth than it could consume.

That meant Jack had to walk directly into the shadow — carrying every lantern he had — and ring the bell-tone at its very center, trusting that six flames together would be enough to answer the seventh's hunger without being swallowed.

Vorrn clicked a note that Jack recognized as the creature's version of I will be right beside you, and for the first time in the whole night, that steadied Jack more than any light could.

He took one long breath, squared his shoulders the way he had on the porch, and walked forward.



Jack stepped into the dark shape and the cold hit him like a wall of held breath — the lantern flames guttered and bent sideways, straining, and for one terrible second he felt the golden glow in the pumpkin falter and begin to go out.

He did not run this time.

He stood firm in the center of the shadow, held every lantern as close together as his arms could manage, and let the bell-tone ring — not once quickly, but sustained, long, and clear, giving it everything the pumpkin had.

The six amber flames bent together toward the center as the bell-tone swelled, and where they converged something cracked — a sound like a crescent-moon clasp snapping free — and from the very heart of the dark shape a seventh flame erupted: not amber this time, but white-gold, brilliant and sharp, as if a star had been folded into the shape of a small lantern.

The dark shape did not dissolve — it transformed: the consuming void collapsed inward with a sound like a deep sigh, and where it had stood there was now the seventh Harvest Lantern: small, iron, crescent-clasp still warm, its white-gold flame already burning steadily inside its cracked glass.

Jack picked it up with shaking, triumphant hands, and every one of the seven lanterns — all the way from the carved pumpkin to the newborn white-gold one — rang their bell-tones together, a single chord that rolled across the entire valley in a warm, resonant wave.

Vornn made a sound Jack had never heard before: not a click or a hum, but something open and bright, like laughter made of bells.





The seven Harvest Lanterns rang their chord one final time as Jack set them in a wide circle on the valley floor, and the sound spread outward in all directions until it faded into the dark hills, leaving behind it a silence that was completely different from the silence of the Hollow Night — warm, settled, and full.

Color came back to the valley as if someone were slowly turning up a lamp: the mist turned from silver-gray to a deep rose gold, the cornfield stalks caught amber, and the bare oak trees gleamed copper at their branches.

Vornn landed on the center lantern — the white-gold seventh one — and sat with all four talons splayed wide around its glow, his teal eyes closing slowly in something that looked very much like relief.

"You were afraid of it," Jack said, looking at Vornn with new understanding. "You knew what the dark shape really was all along, didn't you — a lost lantern — and you were afraid I'd destroy it before we understood."

Vornn opened one teal eye, held Jack's gaze for a long moment, clicked once — yes — and then closed it again, and Jack understood that the creature's fear had not been cowardice but a different kind of courage: the courage of knowing when not to act, and trusting that Jack would find the truth himself.

Jack sat down on the cool grass in the middle of the seven burning lanterns and felt, for the first time that night, genuinely, completely warm.





Jack carried his carved pumpkin home under one arm, its golden glow steady and easy now, its crooked triangle nose facing forward the way it had looked on the porch steps — except now its carved eyes seemed to hold a knowing warmth they hadn't had before.

He set it back on the top step where it belonged, and this time when he looked at the small amber light pulsing inside it, he understood exactly what it was: not a mystery, not a warning, but a kept promise — a light that had been waiting for someone with enough courage to follow where it led.

Vorn settled on the fence post at the bottom of the yard, the same post where Jack had first stumbled back in shock at the sight of him, and folded his wings neatly, his teal eyes soft and watching. "Will you stay?"

Jack asked quietly, looking across the yard at the small, scaled, horned shape on the fence post.

Vorn clicked one note — the short, certain note that meant yes — and one new teal vein-line lit up along his left wing, the very last one that had gone dark, glowing brighter than the rest.

Jack sat down on the top porch step beside his pumpkin, leaned his head back against the door, and listened to the quiet valley — warm, colored, whole — until his eyes grew slow and heavy and the amber light of the Harvest Lantern filled all the dark behind them.

