



The Witches Go To War

1 "Sit quietly and close your eyes. I'm going to tell you a tale of witches and a great sea battle," said Nana.

My sister, Tess, and I sat down quickly, ready for our next great adventure. As I made myself comfortable in Nana's big sofa, I wondered what witches had to do with sea battles. I was about to find out.

"Well, it all started back in 1588 when England and Spain were at war," continued Nan, "and Elizabeth I was the Queen of England."

I pushed myself back into the large cushions and noticed that Tess had her eyes closed already.

2 Nana's warm voice wafted into my mind, covering the dark behind my eyes with images of large ships — galleons — firing cannons at one another, while men scabbled over thick ropes drenched by the sea's salt spray. I saw one man, an Englishman, with short-cropped dark hair and a neatly trimmed beard. His eyes were arrogant, looking over the battle as if he knew that success was already his. He calmly ordered his men about, directing them to load cannons for another volley. Other ships

nearby were echoing his commands, preparing to launch another attack against the enemy — the Spanish Armada.

3 This man was Sir Francis Drake. He was a privateer, a legal pirate working secretly for Queen Elizabeth. Three years earlier he had made an oath to Her Majesty, a promise to attack Spanish ships and steal their gold for the Crown of England. His talents led to successes on such a scale that a massive fleet of Spanish ships, called the Armada, had been sent by King Phillip II of Spain to invade England.

4 The haughty image of Drake and his men liquefied, speeding up as ships, waves, cannons and sailors rushed through my mind. Time had passed. The Spanish Armada was sailing north, up the coast of England to escape from Drake. Terror gripped the Spaniards; they muttered to one another about "burning ships" attacking them in the night. I heard Nana chuckle at these words, her caramel voice assuring Tess and me that "those ships were not the work of witches my dears, just some quick thinking and a lot of gunpowder."

5 I interrupted. "Well, what did the witches do, Nana?"

The images faded to black for a moment, just enough to let Nana snappishly reply, "I'm getting to that girl—be patient!"

With Nana's last syllable the images returned. I could see the Spanish galleons again, this time their brightly painted hulls were scorched black and ragged from cannon fire and the relentless pounding of the North Sea. Dark brown eyes, once lit with the fierce fire of military discipline, were frosted with a fear of the unknown. Desperation clung to the Spanish Armada as they rounded the northern tip of Scotland, using the winds to bring them around into the North Atlantic. Their only

hope of returning to Spain was to pass to the west of Ireland and sneak back through open waters.

6 Suddenly, the images changed as new colours rippled through the blacks and greys of the North Seas. Greens, reds, and yellows wobbled into the form of women, over a hundred or so, gathering together in a forest to watch the setting sun. They were witches, women of the old ways, who had journeyed from all over England to meet in the New Forest of Hampshire. All of England was terrified of an impending Spanish invasion. Every village and town was filled with men armed with whatever farming tool they could find, just in case they had to defend their homes. Old Nanny Hagrell, one of the most respected witches in the land, had summoned her sisters, by crow, by dream and, in some cases, even by letter, so they could all help.

7 I scanned the crowd of women, young and old, trying to catch a glimpse of Hagrell. Already the forest was washed with the hot pink light of the sunset, giving everyone's face an unnatural, ageless glow. Hagrell appeared, an ancient woman with a back as crooked as the walking stick she clung to, hobbling between the trees with the assistance of two young women. Witches shifted as Hagrell passed them, quietly forming into a massive circle. The old woman and her two assistants joined the circle, just as the final hints of pink were swallowed up by purple twilight. It was probably a trick of the light, but for a moment it looked as if one of the young assistants winked at me. Her face did seem familiar.

8 In unison the witches started a low, whispering chant. As they spoke, they slowly moved around the circle in an anti-clockwise direction. My viewpoint kept switching; sometimes I was in the centre of the circle, or I was above the women, or even part of the circle, moving around with the other witches as they picked up speed. Faster and

faster, the witches circled. Even Hagrell seemed to have gained a youthful speed, keeping up with her assistants.

- 9 As the witches ran, the wind picked up. It started with a light breeze, twisting leaves around at the centre of the circle, but soon the forest was filled with a ferocious howling, like the roar of a hundred lions. The witches were a blur, moving so swiftly they no longer seemed real. I could see flashes of light sparkling through the air around me. The wind caught these silvery strands, whipping them up and swirling them around into the sky above. My vision blurred as dizziness gripped me. It felt as if I was flipping in cartwheels while trying to stand on my head.
- 10 I was in a storm. Or I was the storm; it was hard to tell. The silver lights arced and splashed through the violent winds. The forest and witches had vanished; English soil was uncomfortably far from my feet. Instead, I could just make out the poor Spanish Armada, bobbing like toy boats in the ocean below. Crackling with lightning, howling with

fury, the storm plunged down upon the galleons, like a fist slamming down upon a table. Over a hundred ships were destroyed, cast into sodden splinters upon the waves.

- 11 I opened my eyes with a shock. There was Nana, her eyes crinkled by her smile, and Tess too, half-buried in the warm sofa. We were all safe at Nana's house.
- "And that's what really happened to the Spanish Armada," Nana finished.
- "But Nana," I replied, remembering the terror of the Spaniards and the ferocity of the storm, "surely that wasn't the right thing to do."

Nana smiled. "Those were dark days, my dear. We thought about things very differently back then, and maybe not always so good. Thankfully, a lot has changed for the better in the years since. But that's a story for another night. Now, my deary ducks, it's time for bed."

Questions

- Who was telling the story?
 - Tess
 - Nana
 - Drake
- The Armada belonged to
 - Spain.
 - England.
 - the witches.
- Where did the witches meet?
 - North Sea
 - New Forest
 - North Atlantic
- Which of the following was not used to summon the witches?
 - crows
 - dreams
 - messengers
- What did the witches do before they began to circle quickly?
 - They vanished.
 - They began to chant.
 - They twisted the leaves into a circle.
- The winking witch looked familiar to the narrator. Who do you think this witch might have been?
 - Nana
 - Hagrell
 - the narrator was mistaken

Vocabulary

Find words in the text that match the meanings below. The word is in the section shown in brackets.

- To be superior and over confident (2)
- Calm (5)
- Called or beckoned someone (6)
- To do something in a group at the same time (8)
- Disappeared (10)

Grammar

The words in **BLUE** appear in the text. Match them by writing the correct **synonym** shown in **RED**.

E.g. **under** / **below**

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 12 wondered | pilfer |
| 13 directing | speculated |
| 14 steal | interjected |
| 15 interrupted | steering |

Back To The Text...

- The writer often describes the colour of many things.
 - true
 - false
- The witches were patriotic.
 - true
 - false
- This was the first really interesting story Nana had told.
 - true
 - false

Sequencing

Look back through the card to find what happened first. Choose **a** or **b**.

- The witches moved in an anti-clockwise direction.
 - Hagrell hobbled between the trees.
- The wind sounded like the roar of lions.
 - The narrator became dizzy.
- Drake attacked the Armada.
 - The storm plunged down on the ships.

Think About This

- When a writer compares one thing to another it is called a *simile*. In section 10 which of the following is part of a simile?
 - The silver lights arced and splashed ...
 - The forests and witches had vanished ...
 - Like a fist slamming down upon a table...
- Nana had the skills to
 - always remain patient.
 - make you feel you were part of the story.
 - understand naval tactics very well.

Challenge Option

Writing: Write your own description of Hagrell the witch.

