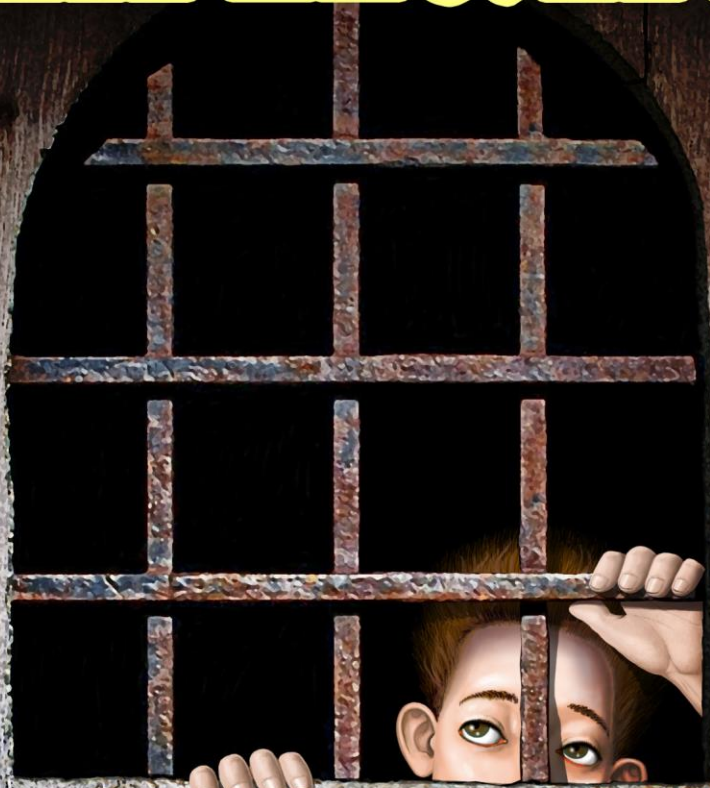


The Out-of-this-World Adventures of ~~Timmy~~^{Tim} Hunter

The Mirror of Doom

Saving Tim Hunter



By Bailey Baxter
Illustrated by LaSablonnaire

FOREWORD

Tim Hunter here.

Remember when I was locked in the evil queen's tower like a dumb Disney princess?

I sure do.

I'll never forget it. It was humiliating.

Not to mention cold. And scary.

Yeah, I was scared. I admit it. You would be, too if some evil-to-the-bone queen was threatening to kill you the next morning.

The worst part was that I really didn't think Gavril and the others would rescue me. I thought they would be clapping each other on the back and congratulating themselves for finally getting rid of me.

Never in my life have I been so glad to be WRONG!

But I've been wondering about one thing.

How did Gavril and Erick get past the castle guards and spring me from the tower without being killed themselves?

I asked Gavril, and here's the story told in his own words...

The Missing Chapter
SAVING TIM HUNTER

I have to admit... watching Queen Morissa drag young Tim away while I stood there and did nothing was not one of my finer moments.

Honestly, I didn't think I had much choice in the matter. But I wasn't sure the others - who were waiting for me at the old guard tower in the woods - would see it that way.

And I was right.

I had barely entered the clearing surrounding the tower when Kat sprang on me like a kitten on a string.

"Is Timmy okay?" She glanced behind me and, seeing no one, became more frantic. "Where is he? Where's Timmy?"

I forced myself to meet her eyes as I delivered the bad news: "The queen has him. She wants to exchange him for the mirror in the morning."

"You let the queen take my baby brother? Why didn't you stop her?"

Her baby brother? I shook my head to clear it. "Kat, you don't understand."

"Oh, I understand all right. Timmy is languishing away in the queen's dungeons right now, and it's all your fault!"

"Kat, if you would just give me a minute to explain--"

But Kat just wouldn't stop talking.

"You're afraid of her, aren't you? You're afraid of the queen. That's why you let her take Timmy!"

I sat down on the fallen tree that had landed five feet from the tower door and sighed.

Do you know that in my nearly 20 years of life, I had sighed maybe twice? Yeah. And then those three came through the mirror, and all I seem to do is sigh.

"Kat, I'm not afraid of that woman," I said.

"Then why did you do it? Why did you let her take him?"

I looked up at Kat. Her eyes were red and full of tears. I felt for her. Really, I did. But I know I did the right thing.

"If I tried to take Timmy away from the soldiers, the queen would have killed him then and there."

"Besides," I added, "do you really expect me to take on a dozen armed men by myself?"

"Beriman and I should have stayed with you," Erick said.

I shook my head. "No. I needed you to get the mirror and the others to safety."

"But we're going to return the mirror to get Timmy back, right," Ron said.

I sighed (again). "We can't do that, Ron."

"But why?" Kat asked, her voice bordering on a whine.

"Do you think Morissa will stop at just taking my father's kingdom? If she gets that mirror back, she'll use it to invade other lands. Hundreds of lives will be at stake - not just Timmy's."

Ron was pacing. "Well, we have to do something, Gavril. We need to get Timmy back."

"I know. I'll think of something."

Kat pounced on that. "You'll think of something?"

Okay, now she was sounding hysterical.

"I'll think of something!" I repeated, feeling a little hysterical myself.

Kat's mouth twisted. Without another word, she turned abruptly and walked to the edge of the clearing. Her back was to me, but I could tell she was wiping her eyes.

Great. She was crying.

With a glance at me, Erick went up to her and touched her shoulder. "Kat, are you all right?"

"We've got to get Timmy back," she said, sniffing a little.

"We will."

"But how?" Ron asked, definitely NOT helping the situation.

"We don't even know where they're keeping him. It's a big castle, you know."

Kat whirled back around. "We could ask the mirror."

I shook my head. "No way."

"Why not? If the queen could use it to spy on her enemies, why can't we use it to find Timmy?"

"I've already told you why. Anyone who looks into it is bewitched somehow. We can't risk it."

"But Gavril--"

"Soldiers!"

My eyes whipped up to see Beriman's head sticking out of the window at the top of the tower where he was on guard duty.

"Where?"

"They're crossing the field, and they're heading this way. There's about a dozen of them."

"We can't let her have the mirror," I said. "Everyone, inside the tower."

"But Gavril," Kat said as we entered the old stone structure, "there's nowhere to hide."

It certainly looked like she was right. The single room contained a spiral staircase leading up to the lookout platform overhead, some leaves and other debris on the floor, and little else.

Fortunately, I knew something she didn't.

"Beriman, get down here," I yelled without answering her, turning my attention to the wooden floor.

Ron looked up the stairs as the dwarf came clattering down.

"Why don't we just hide on the platform?"

I shook my head. "That's the first place they'll look. Why do you think I asked Beriman to come down?"

"Oh."

"But Gavril, they'll catch us," Kat said. "We can't stay here."

I ignored her and kept studying the floor. However, if anything, Kat was persistent.

"Gavril--"

"Kat, just give me a minute, okay?"

"Fine!" Kat turned away with a huff.

"Whatever you're doing, you'd better hurry, Gavril," Beriman said from the doorway. "I can see the soldiers coming through the trees."

Great.

I dropped to my knees and ran my hands over the rough floorboards. Then I felt them - two knots in the wood about four inches apart.

"Everyone, get back!"

Surprisingly, they all listened. I pushed down on both knots with my thumbs and a small, square section of the floor dropped downward.

Ron whistled. "Wow! A trapdoor!"

I gestured toward the hole in the floor. "Everyone inside. Quickly."

Erick, Ron, and Beriman couldn't get through the opening fast enough. But Kat hesitated.

"Are there rats?"

Are you kidding me?

I rolled my eyes. I tried not to, but come on! I had maybe five seconds to get all of us hidden before the soldiers poured into the tower like spilt milk out of a jug. Rats the size of horses could be lurking under the floorboards for all I cared!

"Kat, just get down there!"

"But--"

"Now!" I hissed.

With a look that contained about a hundred daggers, Kat sat down on the floor and slid through the opening.

Finally.

I dropped down beside the others with the mirror and quickly shoved the trapdoor back into place. It closed with a click, leaving us in darkness.

Actually, it wasn't as bad as it sounds. Light sliced through the gaps between the floorboards, allowing me to dimly see the faces of my companions.

As far as I could tell, there were no rats.

Kat opened her mouth to speak, but I lifted my hand to stop her.

The soldiers had arrived.

The sound of heavy footsteps on floorboards pounded in our ears and then stopped suddenly.

"There's no one here," a rough voice said.

"You there," said a soldier with a familiar voice. "Check the platform."

See? I knew they'd search the platform, but I didn't have time to celebrate being right. As the soldier's footsteps quickly receded up the staircase, I racked my brain for where I heard that voice before.

"All clear up here!" the soldier hollered down.

"They must be here somewhere," someone else said. "The queen said Gavril would come here."

"Obviously, she was wrong," said that familiar voice.

And then it clicked.

Captain Grimes! That's who it was! I had beaten him in a jousting contest once.

He's never forgiven me.

"Well, we have to find them," another soldier said. "We can't go back without Gavril and the mirror."

"I don't know why we're searching for them in the first place," the rough-sounding man said. "The boy is locked in the

south tower. He's not going anywhere. And we'll just exchange him in the morning for the mirror as planned."

I smiled to myself.

Thank you very much. Now we know where Timmy is.

"We're searching for them because the queen ordered us to," Captain Grimes said. "Everyone, move out. I know a hunter's shack in the woods that we can check."

With their footsteps shaking the floorboards and rumbling in our hiding place like thunder, the soldiers cleared out of the tower.

Putting my hand on the catch for the trapdoor, I strained my ears and waited. The others were staring at me as intensely as the castle dog watches our cook.

I motioned for them to wait until the noise of the soldiers in the underbrush faded away. Then, I released the catch, lowered the trapdoor, and hoisted myself back up onto the floorboards.

"Did you hear what the soldier said?" Kat asked as I helped her out of our hiding place. "Timmy is in the tower!"

Tim was right. You can't get much past Kat.

"We have to get him out," she continued.

"We will," I said. "Tonight."

The night was closing in on morning when Erick and I crept out of the guard tower and headed toward the castle. The others were staying in the tower with the mirror.

Were they happy about it?

Not one bit.

But would you bring along four other people to sneak into a castle and rescue a prisoner when two of them have no clue about tactical maneuvers at all?

No? Me, neither.

We made our way through the woods and stopped at the edge of the field. The full moon lit it up like a bonfire. There were no trees. No shadows. Nowhere to hide.

Erick gave a little shrug. "We'll just have to stay low and move fast."

And that's what we did. We sprinted across the field with our heads ducked down. All I could think about were those rows of windows in the castle overlooking the gardens and the field. If an early riser happened to be looking outside, well, let's just say it wouldn't end well. And Tim wouldn't be the only one in need of rescuing.

But we made it to the gardens without raising any alarm, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Thanks to all the bushes, vines, and fruit trees, the gardens were full of shadows and loaded

with hiding places. It was nearly impossible to see us as we crept from bush to bush and tree to tree.

We were home free if only we could get past the castle guards.

The castle guards...

Erick and I watched them from behind a bush shaped like an elephant as they marched around the castle.

Yeah, that's all these guys do. They walk in circles all night long. Every night. It's got to be the most boring job in the world.

As the soldiers rounded the corner of the castle, I gave Erick a punch in the arm. "Come on!"

I headed directly for the side entrance that gives easy access to and from the gardens. I knew it probably wouldn't be guarded. And I was right. It wasn't.

Unfortunately, it was locked.

"Now what?" Erick asked.

"I'm open to any ideas," I said, pressing my back against the door to stay in the shadows.

"Well, we can't just waltz in through the main gates," Erick said. "We need to find another way in - and fast. Those guards will be back around soon."

"Right." I stared out into the moonlit garden, thinking hard. "If only we had a rope."

"We do."

"What?" My head whipped around.

"We've got the rope we made from the gold cord on the curtains, remember? When the queen and her soldiers had us trapped in her sitting room, we used it to escape off her balcony with the mirror."

The rope. I smacked my forehead. We had left it tied to the balcony railing just that afternoon. How could I have forgotten about it so quickly?

"Do you think it's still there?"

Erick grinned. "Let's find out."

We started around the castle, hugging the rough stone walls to stay in the shadows and out of the bright moonlight.

We had barely gotten halfway to our destination when we heard voices behind us.

"Soldiers!" Erick hissed.

Already? How did they get around the castle so fast?

Erick and I ducked into a recessed doorway. For kicks, I checked the door.

Locked.

So we dropped into the deeper shadows at the foot of the door, hid our faces (which would shine like beacons in the moonlight), and hoped for the best.

I strained my ears. The soldiers were talking, which they were not supposed to be doing while on patrol.

"... riches beyond imagination," one of them was saying.

"All that for getting the queen's mirror back?" another soldier asked.

"She wants Prince Gavril, too. And those other two kids."

I gripped the hilt of my sword and tensed.

A guy gave a chuckle. "Grabbing those kids would be as easy as snatching a baby. Have you seen them fight?"

The first soldier snorted. "Yeah, well Gavril won't be so easy. Have you seen *him* fight?"

I shifted slightly and readied my legs to spring into action if they even looked in our direction. But they didn't. They just kept walking.

And talking.

"Uh, no," the guy said.

"Well, you might get your chance," the soldier responded as the squad rounded the corner of the castle. "The queen thinks he might try to break that brat out of the tower."

"I hope he does. I can use that reward..."

The voices trailed away.

Erick gave a low whistle. "I thought you were going to attack."

"I wanted to. Those men call themselves soldiers? They're a disgrace. They're not fit to tend the castle pigs!"

"Then why didn't you?"

I sighed. "A fight would alert the queen that we were here, which would make it next to impossible to rescue Timmy."

"And we were outnumbered four-to-one," Erick added.

"Yeah, that too."

Leaving the doorway, we moved on, hugging the wall and staying in the shadows until we reached the queen's balcony.

There, glowing gold in the bright moonlight, was the rope we had stripped from the curtains.

It was still hanging there!

I looked at Erick. He was looking at me.

"Do we dare?" I asked in a whisper.

Erick pointed upward with his chin. "There's a light in her sitting room."

"She keeps the torches and candles burning all night."

"Oh yeah, that's right." Erick paused for a moment, staring up at the balcony. "So she could be waiting for us with a squad of her best soldiers - or she could be asleep."

"Right. It's a gamble, but it's the only way into the castle." I grabbed the rope. "You with me?"

Erick gave a quick nod. "Onward and upward."

It took no time at all to climb the rope and heave ourselves over the stone balustrade. (Tim would have called it a railing.) We crouched in the darkness outside the glass doors to the sitting room and peered in.

Empty, but something didn't feel right.

It was those red velvet curtains hanging over the windows that looked onto the balcony. We had taken them down to tear the gold cord off. If someone had bothered to put them back up, why did they not retrieve the cord from where it was tied to the balustrade?

That didn't make sense - unless the queen wanted us to use it to get back into the castle.

We might be walking into a trap, but what choice did we have? There was no way I was going back to that guard tower without Tim.

With a glance at Erick, who was watching me intensely, I lifted the latch, slowly pushed the door open, and stepped into the sitting room as quietly as a cat.

"Hello, Gavril."

Adrenaline surged through my body. I whipped around to see the queen sitting on a bench against the wall - just out of sight of the balcony doors. She smiled and opened her mouth to speak again.

She was going to sound the alarm. She probably had at least a squad of soldiers waiting in the passageway for her signal.

I had to stop her.

Reaching up, I grabbed ahold of a curtain and yanked with all my might. It came tumbling down in a cascade of heavy velvet - and landed right on top of her.

I couldn't have planned it better. The weight of the curtain took her all the way down to the floor.

Erick suddenly materialized next to me. "Nice," he said.

"Come on!"

I leapt over the queen and headed for her bedroom. Once Erick and I were safely inside, I closed the door.

The room was fairly dark. The only light came from a single candle burning on the table beside the queen's bed. But I could see at a glance it was empty and, for the time being, safe.

"What are we doing in here?" Erick whispered. "We need to take the passageway."

I shook my head. "I think there are soldiers out there."

Motioning for Erick to follow, I moved silently to the door leading to the passageway and inched it open just a crack.

Sure enough, about a dozen men were standing right where I thought they would be - ready to move at the queen's command.

"Help!"

The queen's voice was muffled by the curtains, but I could hear it plainly. And so could the soldiers.

They bolted through that door like hounds spotting their prey, leaving the passageway unguarded.

"Come on," I said to Erick.

We abandoned the queen's bedroom and sprinted up the corridor toward an enclosed stone spiral staircase at the end.

Up we went, taking the stairs two at a time until we reached the fourth floor where the servants lived.

Erik eased open the door. The hall, lit at intervals by torches, was clear. So we started down it on the run, heading for the tower staircase located at the opposite end.

I felt exhilarated. We had outsmarted the queen and her men. We were almost home free!

But my giddiness over our success made me blind. I never saw the chambermaid slip into the passageway from an adjoining room until I was right on top of her.

Make that until I bumped into her.

She screamed. And, if that wasn't enough noise to wake the whole castle, she also dropped the bucket she was carrying with a loud clatter.

The commotion alerted the two soldiers who were apparently stationed near the end of the stone corridor. They ran toward the scene and stopped abruptly when they saw me and Erick.

"It's Gavril!" the taller man said, drawing his sword and looking at me as greedily as a starving man eyes a roasted chicken leg.

He probably had heard about the queen's reward.

Great.

The other soldier just stared at us. His tongue flicked out and licked his lips as his trembling hand clutched his sword.

Must be a new recruit.

I smiled and glanced over at Erick. He grinned back.

Yeah, we had this.

We drew our swords and lunged in unison at the two men.

I took on the taller one. He had some skill with a sword, but nothing I couldn't handle.

We thrust, parried, and counter-parried. I beat back attack after attack until the moment was exactly right.

Feinting to the right, I gave my sword a quick twist and flipped my opponent's weapon out of his hand. It skidded across the stone floor and down the hall.

Pointing my sword at the soldier, I looked over at Erick. He already had the other guy disarmed and pinned up against the wall.

"What took you so long?" he asked.

"Very funny. I let you have the easy one."

Erick gave me that big grin of his. "What next?"

"We take their clothes."

"What?"

"There are sure to be guards posted in the tower. Dressing as soldiers might be the only way we can get past them to Timmy."

"Good point." Erick looked at the soldiers, and his grin turned wicked. "Take off the cloaks and chainmail, fellas."

"And your tunics," I said. "We'll need those, too."

The chambermaid looked up from where she was sopping up the water that had spilled from her bucket and giggled.

"Uh, maybe we should use one of these rooms here," I said, shoving my soldier through the nearest doorway.

It didn't take but a few minutes to disrobe the two men, tie them up, and throw on their tunics and chainmail over our own clothing. We stepped back into the passageway looking like proper soldiers. With the hoods of their cloaks pulled down low over our faces, no one would recognize us.

Maybe.

Just to be on the safe side, we were going to have to walk fast.

And keep our heads down.

Erick pulled the door securely closed and gestured toward a bundle of cloth I had shoved under my arm. "What did you pick up in there?"

I held up a woman's cap and tunic. "A disguise for Tim. It was laying on the floor in the corner."

Erick laughed. "You're going to make him a chambermaid? Oh, he's going to love that!"

"Really?"

"No. I was being sarcastic."

I punched him in the arm. "Come on. Let's get moving."

We headed for the stairs and ran up them two at a time.

"Halt! Who goes there?" came a call from above.

"We have an urgent message from the queen," I said, grateful for the deep shadows in the stairway.

It wouldn't do to be recognized. No, not at all.

"What is the message?"

Erick and I paused a few steps below the landing.

"The castle has been breached by enemies of the queen," I said. "They're coming for the boy."

That got their interest. The two guards snapped to attention, their hands on the hilt of their swords.

But then one took a step forward.

"I don't recognize you," he said. "Identify yourself."

"We're the enemies of the queen," I said, launching myself at the man.

To say we took them by surprise would be an understatement. It took just a few moments of scuffling around on that small

landing - and a few well-placed punches - to subdue the men. Erick and I propped them up against the wall, and I retrieved the key from a hook hanging by the door.

I looked at Erick. "Ready?"

He nodded and flashed that grin again. I swear he loves this kind of stuff.

I twisted the key in the lock and pushed open the door.

Dawn was just breaking outside the tower windows, lifting the darkness a bit. I could just make out someone standing near a bench and headed in that direction.

Was it Tim?

I opened my mouth to speak when I heard a bloodcurdling yell and was hit by a dark, flying shape that knocked me right off my feet.

No doubt about it... we had found Timmy.

THE END