



*Prologue*

## **No Great Concern**

**Y**usef hated rules. His parents, all four of them, had so many rules for him that if they were in a printed book, it would have weighed in easily over three hundred pounds! In the morning – make the bed, brush your teeth, take out the trash, wash up after yourself, put away your dishes, don't slam the cabinet doors, walk Kismet, brush your hair, no electronics before noon, no shoes on the furniture, no eating on the couch, no eating in bed, don't talk with your mouth full, no elbows on the table...and that's just for starters (and those are only Mom's rules.) Dad had a whole other book of rules, although, not as many and not enforced as often, though the penalties were much more severe. Just thinking about it made Yusef cringe.

He cringed now, tears soaking into his pillow as he laid in his bed, under his sheets, his head ringing with rules and repercussions. That day, Yusef had broken six of his mother's rules. He had broken two big ones knowingly and the other four he had just forgotten about. What rules you ask? Well, drinking juice out of the container with the refrigerator door open for one. He didn't even know how she knew about that one. Bucky Willis had called him over from across the street to see a dead squirrel, and he went over without telling anyone because he would only be gone for a second. How could he have known it would lead to a big three hour mystery quest? They did not discover what had caused the squirrels early demise, but they did find, three blocks away, a clue dropped carelessly by Summer Long's uncle Seamus when he said, "Car probably got it." They did not find a single car between Summer's house and Yusef's house with any evidence of squirrel crushing.

Yusef did, however, find his mother screaming at him from the front door. He had forgotten to make his bed, clean up his bowl of mostly eaten cereal, walk Kismet, and forgot to

shut the front door after himself. This sent his mother on a mystery quest of her own to find Kismet who hadn't actually gotten out of the house but, was instead, accidentally shut in the pantry (where he peed on the floor) by Yusef when he did remember to put away the box of cereal (which was *empty* and should have gone into the trash). He was also supposed to tell his mother when he was going out, who he was going with, where he was going, and how long he would be gone. How could he have known? He thought it would only take a second! Nothing happened anyway! Nothing that he could tell his mother about anyway. Yusef still couldn't figure out how she knew about him drinking out of the juice container with the refrigerator door open. He would have to check for cameras later. Had to be cameras, he thought. But the sixth rule he broke and broke on purpose was a big one. It was a rule he didn't even have to think about because he couldn't even imagine himself doing it. Yet, here he was, crying under his sheets, thinking about how awful rules were, and if he didn't have so many dang rules to remember, he probably wouldn't break any at all! If those six rules hadn't of been there he would have never gotten in a fight with his mother and he probably would have never told her to go suck a pig fart. So, yeah, that happened. Yusef cringed at the memory. So now he had to think about hurting his mother's feelings on top of everything else.

Now he had to stay in his room and 'cry all he wanted' until he remembered why he had rules and what they were for and why he should appreciate the structured environment his parents were providing for him. He really hated rules. He whispered to himself, "I hate rules, I hate rules, I hate rules," until he slowly began to fall asleep to the sound of drums coming from beneath his bed. "That is so odd," he thought to himself just before sleep took him deep into a dream where rules were like fairies. They didn't exist.

**A**round just about exactly the same time Yusef began to fall asleep, on just about exactly the same spot on the other side of the unknown world, the Goblin hordes gathered. One army, nearly ten-thousand Goblin strong, made their camp at the base of Moonclimb Mountain. The many campfires burning cast their terrible goblin shadows into the mountains deep crevices and across its jagged peaks making it look as alive as the fires burning below it. Another two armies half the size camped on either side of Whispering Canyon just below Moonclimb Mountain. There were many other Goblin concerns camped here and there that night but only one concern is of any concern to us in this story. Goblins, ten to be exact, cast outs and freaks and, believe me, that's a hard thing to be when you're a Goblin, gathered close but not too close to the massive Goblin gathering. Tonight was the night of the Red Winter Moon! Tonight the Goblins would drum and chant their Goblin King into existence!

Once every hundred years, the winter moon turned as red as blood and sat so large in the sky, it was almost touchable. Goblin legend had it that this night only the true and terrible Goblin King would rise from the mud from beneath a war-blooded cloak wearing a broken horned crown. This King would lead all Goblins in a Great War where Goblins would again rule the world with a terrible fist worshipped by all creatures and never having to hunt

for food again! Of course, in six-hundred years this had not happened and not for lack of trying. What happened was this. Goblins would lay down the bloodied war cloak on top of a fallen Goblin warrior helmet and chant the ancient chant to bring their King from the Other World. If, on the first night of the Red Winter Moon no King appeared, the second night would bring out one or maybe even two brave, foolish or outright delusional Goblins. The Goblin would crawl beneath the sheet, dawn the helmet and proclaim himself king. The only problem with a Goblin declaring himself king was that, said Goblin must, within short order of declaring himself king, declare a rule. Now that doesn't sound like much of a problem for you and me, but for a Goblin, making a rule is like you trying to turn your spit into fudge brownies. But that doesn't stop them from trying.

What happened, most often, is the auditioning king made his grand entrance from beneath the cloak, raised a fist to declare his first rule and then tried, most regrettably, to remember what it was he was going to say and why it was that he thought he could declare himself king. Any Goblin that could not declare a rule after he came from beneath the blood cloak wearing the helmet of the fallen was clubbed, beaten until tender, roasted on a spit over a nice fire, sliced up and served. (And for desert delicious spit brownies.) So, in six hundred years of the Winter Red Moon Goblin Ritual, the Goblins had failed to summon their mighty and terrible ruler. Neither had they gone hungry.

Now, no one in the Other World but the Goblins was too terribly upset by this. The fact that the Goblins had not been able to conjure, summon, volunteer, or come up with a King was good news for every other being in the Other World. Without a King, the Goblins were no threat at all. They fought with each other all the time – army against army, tribe against tribe, Goblin versus Goblin. Without a king and without rule, they would fight each other until the end of time. The fairies even encouraged it. But tonight was an unusual night. The Red Winter moon was not entirely red. A tiny silver crest edged over one side of the moon, and no Goblin could remember that ever happening...except one.

One Goblin in the small concern of no concern of ten outcast misfit Goblins remembered. The last time she had seen this was eight hundred years ago when the malicious and mighty Gurmaltigu had come from beneath the blood cloak wearing the Moose Antler War Helmet of the pretend King Brumixgig. He united the Goblins, gave them a thousand rules, and the world was a Goblin world for two hundred glorious years. Gurmaltigu was a great Goblin King, maybe one of the greatest. But he was not great enough. His end and the end of his reign came abruptly when a Midnight Dragon mistook the mighty moose antler helmet for an actual moose and swallowed Gurmaltigu whole.

"Give us a king, give us a rule," the other nine Goblins chanted. Derdunger let out a sigh and joined the others in the chanting. Give us a king. Please give us a king, she thought.

Then something quite unexpected happened...

**T**he noise began. Yusef wiped eye boogers away and listened beneath his sheets. The noise sounded closer and got louder and Yusef started to get scared. It was like when a dog in another neighborhood started to bark. And then a dog closer to his house would bark. And then the dog that lived behind his house would bark... and finally Kismet would bark. Yusef always imagined the dogs were barking at something moving its way over rooftops and walls coming closer to his house. Closer to his room. Coming to snatch him away.

But this was different. He could hear voices singing or, not exactly singing, more like praying. More like loud praying. It got louder and louder until it sounded like bears growling words in unison. Yusef could make out the words now. Now he could hear what the gruff bear voices were saying.

“Give us a king, give us a rule, give us a king, give us a rule,” the voices growled. Rules? Kings? That made Yusef relax a little bit. Now he knew he was in a dream. Maybe not a dream exactly probably more a nightmare than a dream. There would be monsters, Yusef knew. But they were chanting about rules, and that made Yusef’s blood begin to boil. This might be a nightmare with terrible monsters and terrible rules but it was his nightmare, and his rules mattered in his nightmares! Yusef sat up as fast as he could under his sheets and felt something clunk heavy on his head. What the heck had he left on his bed? He reached up to feel what was on his head when he realized the voices had stopped. Maybe he woke himself up from his nightmare. Yusef listened closer. He couldn’t hear anything. But something was different. The little bit of light that came through his sheets was red. Cautiously, Yusef stood up on his bed with the heavy thing on his head and peeked out from under the sheets. The monsters were still there.

**Derdunger** watched in awe as the blood cloak (actually an old table cloth with strawberry stains) rose up from the ground. Ten Goblins stood, their jaws dragging the ground. The blood cloak had risen with their chants. The horns of the old beaten helmet draped the cloak and then the sheet parted – only slightly at first so the Goblins could not see what was looking back at them. Derdunger thought the sheet would keep moving up and up until it towered over them like it had with Gurmaltigu – twice as tall as any Goblin had ever been – but not this sheet. It had stopped when it was only as tall as a Goblin child. “Only as tall as a Goblet,” someone said from behind her.

They all stood still and watched the coat and whatever was beneath it stand motionless.

“Give us a King?” Derdunger said in a low voice. The others began their chant hesitantly at first and then in earnest, “Give us a king! Give us a rule!” Then the chant changed with the Goblins excitement, “A king, a king, a rule, a rule!”

The coat dropped to the ground.

**T**hey were hideously uncool monsters. Not like anything Yusef had ever seen in his dreams before. A couple were even funny looking. They just stood under the moon staring at him. That was creepy but not scary. His room was gone and the moon was a deep red color like the moon looks when it's in eclipse. Yusef was unsure what to do in his dream now. It was not like any other dream he had ever had before. This dream felt and smelled real. Smelled? Since when do dreams smell? Maybe he smelled so bad that the smell got into his dream. Yusef took a deep sniff of his armpit and that's when the monsters started making noise again.

"Give us a king," he heard, just barely. And then the other monsters started in. "Give us a king, give us a rule!" They chanted, if you could call it chanting. It sounded more like bears cheering at a football game. Then the words changed and Yusef felt the blood warming up his face. "A rule, a rule, a king, a king," they kept on. A rule? They wanted Yusef to give them a rule! He was so sick of rules! He hated rules! Rules were no fun! Rules trapped you and suffocated the fun out of you! Why would anybody want rules?

Before he knew it the sheet dropped off of him, and he stood with his fist in the air, "You want a rule?" he yelled at the monsters. They stopped their chanting and their eyes got bigger, almost like they were scared of Yusef. Good, he thought, let them be scared. "You want a rule?" he screamed at them again.

Yusef's face burned with anger, "I'll give you monsters a stinking rule!" Yusef pointed at them, "My Rule is this!" He took a deep breath and made his voice as loud as he could make it.

"My rule," Yusef shouted, "is," – the goblins eyes grew wider still – "there are no more rules!"

The Goblins faces turned into wicked snaggle-toothed smiles, and they cheered. The red moon thundered.

The Great Goblin War, unbeknownst to anyone at the time, had begun.

# Chapter 1

## OBEKEY

Kisser Fairy heard the news first from an antelope. Then a frightened fawn. Then a panicked hummingbird affirmed the antelopes and fawns stories. The Goblins had chosen a king. This would ordinarily not be cause for alarm. Most animals panicked when Goblins crowned king. Fawns, antelope and especially hummingbirds were prone to excited flights of fancy and were always the first to freak out about, well just about anything. Kisser fairy saw no reason to panic. She would go and see what Goblin had been crowned king. She knew she probably wouldn't get there in time. The newly crowned Goblin would, most likely, have been turned into an unrecognizable lump of broken pieces by now. In six-hundred years a dozens and dozens of Goblins had declared themselves king but not a single one was ever able to make a rule and truly become the Goblin King. And that was just fine with Fairies. In fact, that was just about fine with everyone except for the Goblins of-course.

Goblins hardly ever made trouble for anyone while they were kingless. Fighting with one another was all they really did until they found a king to Rule them. When they do find a king, though, they're an unstoppable foe. When that happens, and it doesn't happen too often, thousands of creatures try to find a way out of this world. Most think the human universe is pretty terrible but it's a better alternative to finding yourself roasting over a Goblin campfire. Kisser Fairy shuddered at the thought.

Moonclimb mountain rose up fast as Kisser Fairy flew over Dragon Lakes. The Goblins, if they were still on the other side of the mountain, would either be celebrating a new King or they would be chanting for a new one. Kisser Fairy sincerely hoped for the latter. As she flew up into the high mountain her heart began to sink. The Goblin fires burned bright as ever. Thousands of Goblins as far as the eye could see were all quiet. They were not chanting. This was the last night of the Red Winter Moon and, had a king not been made, they would still be chanting. She flew ever closer to their fires, her ears pricked wide open, listening for any conversation that might confirm her worst fears.

Camp after camp she spied. The fear rose in her after every camp for in each camp the Goblins were putting away their holy relics. The blooded coats and the broken helmets were all being burned in their campfires. They had chosen a king. But how long had it been? Surely not long enough for the new King to have written his Rules in their legendary book of

the unbroken. Six hundred years ago it is known that the Goblin King then took three years and fifteen pages to add his rules to the book. Only then could the Goblins burn their coats and helmets. What was going on here? Something incredible? No doubt. Something to worry about? No doubt. She had to see more.

It was the same story in every camp Kisser Fairy spied: Broken helmets wrapped in cloaks and tossed with very little reverence into fires, Goblins grumbling and sloughing off their high hopes and all of them staring off toward the deep winding veins of Whisper Canyon. They all seemed to be heading in the general direction of the mostly dark canyon. While the mountain was lit with thousands of fires, far off Whispering Canyon had barely a scattered handful of camps some seemingly no larger than fifty – maybe a hundred at most – Goblins. Some seemed smaller. As Kisser Fairy snuck swiftly around and through the camps she heard the Goblins grumbling to one another. Some saying there was a king but he made a rule to make his rules the only rules. She heard too that the new King would not put blood to paper and add his rules to their *Book of the Unbroken*.

Kisser Fairy had heard stories about the Goblin Rulebook. She had heard that the goblins had made the paper out of fairy wings and bound the book with glue made from unicorn horns and made its cover from a Midnight Dragon's skin. It was a Goblin King's first act as a new king to fill the book with all the rules he could think of. Needless to say, it was not a very big book. But still, to hear of a Goblin King that was not going to put any new rules into the book? That was as disconcerting as it was hopeful. Maybe the new Goblin King was so brainless that he could only think of one rule. Maybe he couldn't write either. Maybe this Goblin King wouldn't be so bad. The Free Folk might not have anything to worry about. It might only take a handful of trained Fairy warriors to dethrone this new king and everything could go back to normal. She followed the Goblins torches that wound fiery veins into the bottom of the canyon.

As she flew closer the small camps in the canyon had turned into one large camp and the general mood of the Goblins had gone from discouraged, distracted and grumpy to proud, focused and – dare she say it – happy! She would have to be very careful now. Goblins didn't like Fairies all too much and she didn't want to end up as pressed fairy paper in their Goblin rule book.

She flew as close as she could to where the Goblins had circled a small tent. The noise from the Goblins in the canyon was deafening. Whispering canyon was so named because a whisper would carry from one end of the canyon to the other as clearly as if you were standing next to a person whispering in your ear. With over a thousand Goblins in the canyon now Kisser Fairy had to stuff her ears with leaves just so she could hear herself think. There were too many goblins between her and the tent now so she decided on perching in an old withering tree growing out of the canyon wall. She would have a good view of the new King when he emerged from his tent.

When he showed himself she could size him up, fly back home, gather a band a heroic warriors, defeat the dumb king and go home to a parade! Oh, she thought, flowers and fireworks! The Free Folk would name a day after her! No! They would name a whole season after her!

“Kisser’s Season!” She said out loud. And she heard herself. She heard her voice echo in the silent canyon. She looked down to see all the Goblin looking up into the sky. She tucked herself deep into the tree’s branches. During her daydreaming the King had come out of the tent and the Goblins had gone silent. Stupid move, she thought to herself. Her words from a second ago carried on an echoing wave through the canyon. A long echoing reminder of exactly how much danger she was in right now. She looked toward the tent and to the small helmeted figure that stood outside now. He too looked up into the sky and around the canyon, presumably listening to her own echoing words fading.

Fairy eyes are incredibly good at seeing long distances. Good at seeing close up too. Overall incredibly good at seeing everything except tonight maybe. The figure that came out of the tent was barely large enough to be a Goblet never mind a full size Goblin. What kind of Goblin was this new king? Kisser Fairy strained her eyes to see the new King but he was facing the wrong way. C’mon, turn around so I can get a good look at you, she thought. And then, as if the new king had heard her thoughts, he turned around. She could see his face.

“Oh no,” she whispered, “*Obekey.*”



## Chapter 2

# SO THIS ISN'T A DREAM

The monsters gawked at him for about five minutes Yusef guessed. They shook hands, gawked at him, hugged one another, gawked at him some more and a couple even tried to touch him. He had screamed, "No!" in his loudest dog-about-to-do-something-wrong-voice and it had worked. It had even frightened him a little bit too. For some reason his voice seemed a lot deeper and a lot louder. Dreams can be funny that way. He was having a vivid dream. He remembered his mother telling him that some dreams seemed so real to her she would wake up and have to check if she had just dreamt or if her dream was actually real. Twice he knew she had a dream that had been about him being taken away and she had burst into his room to make sure he was still in his bed. That must be the kind of dream he was having here. His stomach rumbled.

The Goblins stopped. Their ears pricked up and they stared with that dumb 'holy cow' look on their faces. The same look they had on their faces when he had dropped the blanket.

"I'm hungry," he explained to the monsters. He had never seen a group of people or monsters move the way they did except for in cartoons. They ran into one another, threw open bags, dug into the dirt, tossed each other out of each others way, dumped over buckets and one even tried to offer himself up as food. Yusef doubted they understood English but he said, "I don't want to eat you."

"That's a relief," the monster replied. Well, they did understand English after all! Of course they did. It was only a dream.

A big round monster with curling horns half the size of its body walked up holding something out in front of its body. It looked like a dead Opossum. But it was not an Opossum. Opossums do not have eight legs and cat eyes.

"What is that?" Yusef said to the monster holding the...whatever it was.

"It is all we have for you my King," it said, "until we can gather a proper feast. We did not expect to have you amongst *us* tonight."

"Okay," Yusef said, "but I'm not eating that."

“Of course not, my King.” He tossed the eight legged opossum over a shoulder where it hit the ground, lay there a moment, raised its head, looked around, tried to run and was promptly swallowed up by another monster.

“Do you happen to have something to eat that won’t run away?”

The monsters looked at one another. Then they looked at Yusef. One monster stepped forward. This one was taller than other monsters and his face was narrow and solemn looking. Its eyes were beady and his forehead was covered with spikes that looked like lions claws. Its pointed ears were both pierced. A toy army man hung from the right ear and on the left ear a baseball trading card hung by a paperclip. It knelt in front of Yusef and bowed, its head still several feet above Yusef’s own. Carefully its hands reached up to its ears, plucked the army man, the trading card and, with what felt like much ceremony, handed them to Yusef. Yusef took them, one in each hand.

“Hmmm,” he said looking at the olive green figure stretched out, a bent rifle to his shoulder, “a sharpshooter.” He flipped the trading card over in his hand, “Jackie Robinson? Never heard of him before. I’m really not a baseball fan and I already have enough sharpshooters. Thanks but no thanks,” Yusef said and handed the monster back his funny ear decorations. The monster took them in his hands and, Yusef swore, as it turned away it looked like it was crying.

“We are sorry but you may have picked the poorest and most unworthy of all the Goblin clans.” Yusef turned and saw the monster talking to him. It was a mutated frog with big teeth, ram horns and a beard. Its eyes were different colors: one red, one blue. “You have honored us and our legacy will be great but we have no food, no trinkets and no worthy crown for you. The helmet you wear on your noble skull is not that of a fallen warlord but mine from when I was a Goblet. I must ask,” it tilted its head and move closer to Yusef, “Why did the King choose us?”

Yusef reached up and took off the helmet he had forgotten was on his head. It was old and beat up. The horns had been broken off and fastened back on with torn cloth and some bad smelling glue. The visor was cobbled together of different pieces of metal that didn’t look like they belonged together at all. The inside smelled like the crawlspace under his house. Yusef loved it.

“Look,” Yusuf said to the ten monsters, “I didn’t pick you. My sub conscience picked you. I’m just having a dream or a nightmare...” Not a very scary nightmare, he thought, “And I’ll probably wake up soon anyway. Won’t even remember you monsters anyway. So no big deal, okay?”

The brow above the red and blue eyes furrowed and its eyes squinted as it looked closer at Yusef. The frog monster pointed at the tall monster and said, “Light the Call.” The tall monsters beady eyes grew ever so slightly larger. Yusef imagined that must be what surprise

looks like on that particularly odd monster face. The other monsters, too, looked surprised and a little unsure of this command. Their hesitation was palpable.

“Look at him!” The bearded frog monster pointed at Yusuf. “No Goblin! Not even close! He is dreaming *us*.” It got up off the ground and limped a circle around the others. “You know the legend? Our lost legend? The Goblin story the free folk buried before Goblin memory?” The monsters all exchanged glances. None of them looked like they had anything close to a clue as to what the frog monster was talking about.

“Look closer friends. What we have here is not a Goblin King.” The monsters looked at Yusef. Their expressions turned from puzzlement to anger in a flash. Maybe this is a nightmare, thought Yusef. “What we have before us now my good Goblin friends is nothing more and nothing less than legend.” The monsters faces all looked as blank as grotesque could look blank. Dumbfounded would be a good word to describe their expressions.

The frog monster or goblin thing turned toward Yusef. One long fingernail came up to Yusef’s nose and made him crosseyed.

“You are no longer dreaming your world, Obekey,” the monsters all drew in a sharp, short stunned breath at the frog monsters words! The long fingernail touched Yusef’s forehead and pushed back his helmet. “You are Obekey. You are no longer dreaming your world because now you are dreaming ours. You are more than a Goblin King! You are Obekey!”

Frog monst – goblin hissed a scream at the tall one, “Now light the Call! Bring the Clans!” The other Goblins gathered wood in a hurry and tossed it onto the small fire already burning until it became a roaring fire. The tall Goblin unraveled a small piece of leather and poured a handful of silver powder into his hand. The curly horned Goblin broke off a long pointed end of one of his horns. Tall Goblin poured the dust from his palm into the horn and held the horn into the fire, said some words Yusef could not hear. Tall Goblin turned his back to the fire just as the fire turned into a blaze of green light so bright Yusef had to shut his eyes and turn away.

“Come my King, you must have questions. I can help you help us,” the frog goblin said as they moved into a small tent away from the blinding green bonfire light. The Goblin put a hand on Yusef’s shoulder and Yusef felt, for the first time, this may not actually be a dream.

“So, first let me ask you something.” Cautiously, he let the question slip out of his mind and into his lungs. “So, this isn’t a dream?” The Goblins red eye glistened in the dark tent.

“First, my name is Derdunger,” The Goblin said, “Now, tell me *your* name.”

## CHAPTER 3

# HORNS AND HALOS

The Carrion beetle waddled, rolled and flipped herself over and down the long rocks of Moonclimb Mountain. As she made her way down she sang a song, which beetles of her kind never sang unless they were about to have dinner. Today was different. Today was the beginning of something extraordinary. It was time for her kind to ready themselves. The millions of voices from the billions of bones from which her ancestors had risen called out to her now, "Gather your brothers and sisters! It is time to harvest and grow!" Soon, she knew, her voice would not be alone. It would be one in a choir of millions!

A mountain goat perched high above the beetle on the tiniest of ledges puzzled over the lone beetle singing. There were no vultures spiraling in the morning sky. He could smell nothing of death from anywhere in the valley below. He looked again shrining his eyes to the horizon. *No, he thought, no reason for that beetle to be singing.* Now, that was puzzling to a mountain goat. They dared death on a daily basis and were very familiar with its scent.

"Hey there!" The mountain goat yelled down to the beetle, his voice echoing off the mountain walls. "What's all the singing about?"

The beetle did not stop to look back at the mountain goat and only interrupted her song to shout, "It's about being happy."

The mountain goat was more puzzled than ever. Why would a beetle be singing a happy song when there was absolutely nothing anywhere for it to be singing about? The goat thought for a moment. He could go down the mountain and ask the beetle. He could. He might even get a satisfactory answer from the bug. Then again, he might not. He was almost ready to leap to a low precipice when he had another thought. The beetle is probably crazy. Yes, that had to be it. The beetle had been up in the mountains for too long. Everyone knows that being too high for too long can drive lots of creatures crazy. Even a mountain goat came down on occasion for news and other dietary needs. *Well, the goat thought, a crazy carrion beetle. Never thought I'd see the day.* And that settled the mountain goat's uneasy thoughts about the beetle and her song. Absolutely nothing more to it than a beetle that had lost its mind. And that is all the mountain goat had to do with that beetle.

A shame, though. Had the mountain goat been slightly more inquisitive and had he taken the time to ask the beetle what it was celebrating with its song, the Great Goblin War may have been avoided entirely. Well, probably not entirely but surely, it wouldn't have been quite as destructive.

The mountain goat carried on his way up the mountain and the beetle continued to sing her beetle song as she crossed into a vast open plain. Half the day into her walk across the plain, the beetle heard a voice above her head.

"What are you on about Little Miss Beetle?" Two large brown eyes peered down. The beetle looked up into the eyes that, fortunately for her, belonged to a jack rabbit that had no taste for beetles like her.

"I'm in a celebratory mood, my fine flat footed friend," the beetle responded.

"Oh?" The rabbit smiled, with a sudden instinctual feeling that something was very wrong here, he stood on his back legs and looked over the valley. "What exactly," he continued, his nose twitching sniffing the air rapidly, "brings you to my meadow in such a grand mood?"

"Oh my," the beetle said surprised. "You haven't heard?" The beetle could hardly believe no one else had heard the news. Surely, this news could not be so slow to travel!

The beetle wiggled her abdomen and took in the air. She swept her foreleg out and across her eyes as if she were reading words in the air and said to the rabbit, "The Goblins have declared a new King!" She squealed with delight.

Jack Rabbit's eyes went wide, and his legs felt weak. He squatted as close to the beetle as he could. "Can you say that again, dear beetle friend?"

The beetle shrugged and with her best, loudest annunciation she said, "The. Goblins. Have. Declared. A. New. King."

"Oh dear, oh dear," the rabbit worried aloud. "Tell me, dear friend, when did this happen *exactly*?"

"*Exactly*? Hmm, I am not too sure *exactly* when," the beetle said thoughtfully scratching his head. "I've been so caught up in my little revelry that I have hardly been paying attention to the time at all!"

"This is very important, Beetle! How many red moons into the ceremonies were the goblins before they declared a king? How long since you left Moonclimb Mountain?" Jack Rabbit thumped his back foot excitedly, impatient for an answer.

"Well, when you ask the question that way it clears things up in my head quite nicely! You should ask all your questions that way and..." The beetle looked up into the furrowing

brow of the impatient rabbit. "...Oh, I see, yes eh-hem. I left the mountain on the second night of the red moon, or was it the third night? I'm sure it was one of the two because the air was so calm on the mountain before the first red moon. I remember getting the feeling it was getting past my time to go." The beetle turned as she was saying, "Do you know the feeling? You know the one?" But when she turned her eyes up to look for the rabbit he was already gone. "Come to think of it," she said to the space where the rabbit had been, "I am sure now that it was the first night."

The rabbit ran as fast as he could, faster even, than he had run in his entire life! The meadow quickly gave way to the sandy hills of the Dragon Lakes where the rabbit skirted the edge of the shoreline. There was no time! He had to tell everyone! It was a matter of huge consequence!

"What's the hurry, Rabbit?" A sparrow asked as he darted over the rabbit's head. Annoyed by the sparrows low flying interruption, the rabbit hurried on without a word. The sparrow flew up quite taken a-back by the rabbits cold shoulder.

The rabbit pressed harder into his run and as he did he thought, "When the Fairy realized the great peril I have put myself in with the news I carry and the miles and miles I have run to bring them the news, they will reward me! Surely, they will!"

Above him the sparrow was desperately trying to get his attention. He flew as if he were having a fit! An absolute fit! The rabbit smiled to himself. The bird would not be stealing his thunder today! The reward for such important news would be great indeed! Perhaps a parade would be involved! Medals no doubt!

"Watch out, Rabbit!" The rabbit heard the sparrow call!

"I'll watch out, alright!" The rabbit thought. "I'll watch out for feathered busy bodies as I—."

And that's the last thing the rabbit thought as a fox trotted happily away with the easiest lunch he had ever caught.

"Oh no," said the sparrow as he circled high above the trotting fox. "Poor, poor rabbit! I wonder what had that rabbit so frightened that he would be running so quickly away from his meadow?" The sparrow followed the rabbit's trail until he had reached the rabbit's meadow. Down below he heard a something singing.

His sharp eyes quickly spotted the jovial beetle happily dancing and singing her way along the rabbit's well worn trail. How very odd, the sparrow thought to himself as he listened to the beetle's song. He circled once more and came down directly in front of the happy beetle.

"Excuse me," he said to the beetle.

The beetle screamed! She began to dig furiously into the dirt hoping to avoid the sparrow's terrible beak!

"You mistake my intentions, Miss Beetle," the sparrow said as he plucked her out of the dirt and flipped her onto her back.

"Please don't eat me," the beetle cried in terror!

"I am not going to eat you." The sparrow cocked his head and stared thoughtfully at the beetle laying on her back. "I simply wanted to chat with you for a moment." The beetle stopped squirming and pulled her legs into each other.

"You're not going to eat me?" The beetle looked deep into the sparrow's eyes searching for some sort of reassurance."

"No. I already said I was not going to eat you," the sparrow chirped. "I simply wanted to inquire about a rabbit I saw leaving this meadow in more than hurry."

"What?" The beetle replied, her voice still quivering.

"I wanted to ask you about the rabbit!" The sparrow said emphatically.

"Oh. I... Oh! The rabbit you say?" The beetle tried to right herself without any luck. Sparrow flipped her over right side up and she began to calm somewhat. "Oh, yes, I remember the rabbit. Left in an awful hurry. We didn't really get to finish our conversation!"

"I see," he said. "And what was it you were talking about?"

"This and that," the beetle said as she moved nervous circles of dirt around with her forelimbs. "Mostly he wanted to know why I was singing and what I was so happy about."

"That's all?" The sparrow asked hardly believing the beetle's story.

"Yes," the beetle backed away from the shiny bird beak. "He didn't even ask what song I was singing although, I assume now that most know my songs."

"Excuse me Miss Beetle, but I've been flying over this meadow and I have neither seen nor smelled anything to give you or any other carrion beetle reason to sing," the sparrow stated matter of fact. "So what is it you were discussing with rabbit – bless his furry soul – that could have made him run off so recklessly?"

"Oh, Sparrow, I wasn't singing because of a smell..although, I do smell something now...anyhow, I was singing of the smells and things to come. I told him I was singing a celebration song and that I had just come down from Moonclimb Mountain where the Goblins had just declared a king. Then he asked me how long I had been walking and when *exactly* the Goblins had declared their king and..." The beetle looked up from the circles she

had drawn in the dirt to find the sparrow was no longer standing in front of her. "And he was gone! Just like you! What is it with the animals around here?"

Sparrow was a missile against the bright blue sky. He told the fox first. Even though he was full to bursting with his practically free lunch the fox too ran as fast as he could to spread the alarm.

Sparrow flew for miles telling everyone the news. Finally, when his wings had just about given out he landed on the head of an antelope and rested between her horns.

"You are an angel, Sparrow! You may have saved all of us with the news you have flown so far and hard to carry!" The antelope would spread the news and carry sparrow between his horns until he could fly again.



# CHAPTER 4

## GONNA NEED A LOT MORE ROCKS

About a ten day flight or three weeks walk from the rabbit's meadow there was a large ranch. The ranch was a lot like a ranch that you might know. The animals, too you might find familiar but would be unexpected, indeed out of place, on a ranch in your world. The animals were not cows, steers, horses, or any other of the four legged creatures common to ranches. The animals on this ranch actually had, depending on the species, between zero and sixteen legs. This ranch was of all things a caterpillar ranch! The caterpillars, some the size of pillows, some small dogs, others as big as alligators were on the ranch for different reasons. Some were there for their fine fur, others for their fine spun silk. Some had spines that were as sharp and as hard as needles and some of them had needles that were sharp and poison. The spines could be used for a variety of things, but most of the spines would be used for arrows, spears, and fence pickets. And then some were raised on the ranch because, after metamorphosis, they would be big enough for a Tickle to ride.

Now just as unique as the insects populating this ranch, the ranch hands sometimes known as caterpillar herders, larvae loopers, or slug surfers<sup>1</sup> were aptly named 'Tickles.' Tickles are similar to sloths but much smaller and with a hundred times more energy. They have four arms, like sloths but do not spend their lives in trees although they are still extremely good climbers. Their necks are long, their heads are small and their eyes are large. They come in a variety of colors and most have fur somewhere on their bodies. On average most Tickles are about the size of a human hand only slightly larger than a fairy. Although they are as unique and varied as the fairies they are not nearly as popular in human mythology. They have never been featured in a Disney movie nor have they been the subject of any fairy tale, fable or children's book. No one really understands why this is, especially the Tickles themselves. Like Fairies, Tickles are products of human imagination, invention and a creative energies. You would know them as tickle bugs or tickle monsters (though they are not monsters at all unless you are susceptible to tickling fits that result in falling down stairs, choking on your waffles peeing in your pants). Some tickles think they are actually the first

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<sup>1</sup> 'Slug Surfer' is a term originally coined by Garden Gnomes referring to a Garden Gnome that does not tend to his or her garden and lets it become over run with snails, weeds or show major signs of absenteeism. Slug Surfer is now a popular idiom often used to refer to any extremely lazy creature.

of all imaginary creatures to be born of human imagination and children laughter. They think it's every adults first instinct when looking at a baby to tickle the poor thing. Every time a human plays a tickle game with a child a Tickle comes into the world. Well, not your world but this world and it is hugely populated with them. Imagine what kind of games some other being has to play to populate your world with creatures like you!

Sir Gertrudemous Tickle known to some as 'Bareback Jack' but to most as '*Sir Tickle*' was the Head Honcho of the Tough Luck Ranch. When he was younger and not quite as careful as he was these days he was apt to get into some tricky situations. Once while riding a herd of spiny caterpillars back to the ranch the herd got spooked by a wild collard lizard! The herd stampeded! The stampede ran through a huge gnome village wrecking every garden and throwing the gnomes into a hysterical frenzy! Not far from the village the earth fell away into a perilous canyon and that happen to be exactly where the stampeding caterpillars were headed! Gertrudemous Tickle jumped into action. He jumped from his mount and ran across the backs of every spiny caterpillar until he got to the lead caterpillar! When he reached the lead caterpillar he grabbed onto its long poisonous head spines, sat on the caterpillar and lead the entire herd away from the hundred foot cliff! He rode that caterpillar all the way back to the ranch without a saddle. It was crazy, he even admitted himself, to ride a poisonous caterpillar that far without a saddle. What he did not admit was that his rear end was sore for weeks after. From that day forward everyone called him Bareback Jack. A few Tickles even wrote songs about the stampede and Bareback Jacks brave actions that day. For some reason though gnomes never sung those songs.

On this particular day, Sir Tickle was riding the fence line looking for breaks in the fence where something might get in or a caterpillar might get out. He was on his favorite caterpillar Avalanche. Avalanche was a huge winter caterpillar that Sir Tickle had found way off of his wintery mountain during an unusually warm winter. Not usually fond of warmer climates, winter caterpillars usually stayed up in the winter mountains and were notoriously hard to tame as well as extremely territorial. Sir Tickle had twice tried to take Avalanche back to his mountains and both times he had found the giant caterpillar waiting outside his front door the next morning. Now they were inseparable and really quite a stunning pair.

The day was beautiful, pleasant and clear with not a cloud in the great blue sky. It was also awfully strange. There was a kind of electricity in the air that Sir Tickle could feel. It was the kind of electricity that made your hair stand on end and made him keep looking over his shoulder for something that was never there. It was annoying. His gut told him to ride back to the ranch. So, being Bareback Jack, he rode out away from the fence line, away from the ranch.

Avalanche could feel it too. The caterpillars long blue spines, usually hidden beneath his wintery fur stood out, just visible enough to let anything know he was dangerous.

"I dunno Avalanche," Sir Tickle said as they rode cautiously through the high brush. "Feels like a big storm is coming. Wish I could see one. It'd sure make me feel better if I could." The caterpillar shot a pulse through his segmented body in agreement. They stopped by a large Koby tree where Avalanche began to graze on the fallen leaves. He chomped one leaf down in three large bites and began on another when a frightened moan came from underneath.

"Whoa there, bud," Sir Tickle jumped down and pulled the leaf off of the moaning thing. "What do we have here?"

A hawk laid on the ground curled up with two broken wings and countless other wounds all over his mangled body. He was barely breathing.

"Hawk?" Sir Tickle reached out afraid to touch the wounded creature but wanting to help it, "Hawk, what happened to you? Who did this?"

"Crows," the hawk whispered in a pained voice, "they, they're trying to keep it bottled up."

"Crows? You're talking crazy, Hawk," Sir Tickle said as he examined the hawk closely, looking closely at the many wounds covering its body. This hawk wasn't long for this world if he didn't get help soon!

"The message," the hawk coughed out, "they're trying to keep it bottled up."

Sir Tickle gave the Hawk a puzzled look. "Why would a crow do that? Crows do not attack hawks!"

"Come closer, tickle," the hawk strained to speak. Sir Tickle got up close to the hawk's beak. "You must tell the fairies. Tell everyone." The hawk drew in a deep shuttering breath and his eyes began to roll back in his head.

"Tell everyone what, Hawk?" Sir Tickle, suddenly alarmed, asked the hawk desperately.

The hawk opened one eye and said, "Goblins. They have a king. They chose a king." The hawk's beak barely opened as he spoke his one last word, "Obekey." The hawk let out a long breath and his eyes closed. He didn't move after that.

Sir Tiny grabbed a spine on Avalanche's side and swung himself onto the big caterpillar's back. "Let's go, Avalanche! Get a move on you giant worm!" Sir Tickle, eyes wide with the shock of the hawk's message, didn't have to hurry the caterpillar much. The long insect turned himself up and around and headed toward the ranch at full speed!

The Goblins have a King! The words echoed a terrible echo in his head. The odds of the Goblins conjuring a king were usually slim but Obekey? Obekey had been here before.

Some had been good and helpful, others visitors and some had been destructive but an *Obekey Goblin King*? Bad feelings amplified! Avalanche was heading toward the fence line going the long way.

“No time for fences today,” he yelled to his giant steed. He pulled on the reigns. Avalanche reared up on his back legs and fell crashed through the fence. Pieces of fence flew everywhere! The caterpillars feet dug into the dirt as he launched himself into a gallop faster than he had ever galloped before! If anyone had seen Avalanche and Sir Tickle moving across the ranch land that day they would have pinched themselves.

The electric air and the strange feeling he had been feeling made sense to him now. There was a storm coming. A storm was coming and it was the worst kind he could have imagined. Even worse, he didn't know how far or how close it was. The dread he felt was heavy ice running through his veins. “C'mon big A! We got a lot of ground to cover,” he said.

Then a shadow passed over his head.

The crow came down at him like a dagger falling through the sky! Instinctively he dropped over the side of Avalanche gripping the reigns. The crow sliced through the air ,its claws missing the top of his head by hairs! Sir Tickle swung himself back up, unholstering his slingshot and drawing a smooth stone from his pouch! He cradled the stone in the sling while he searched the sky!

The crow flew up and turned a slow circle. The tickle was out in the open and an easy target on his fat caterpillar. Too easy, thought the crow. He smiled to himself, folded back his wings and fell through his attack cry. His prey, only seconds from his talons, turned its body to look up at him! All the better, thought the crow!

Sir Tickle, mostly his younger Bareback Jack self now, felt the stone missile in the cradle of the sling. He drew it back as far as the muscles in his arm would allow. The crow was falling faster than an arrow! Its talons glinted in the sunlight. Bareback Jack took a deep breath. He let the cradle go. The stone missile fired through the air at ten times the speed of the crow.

The crow and the stone met quick, brief, lethal. Bareback Jack watched as the crow and the stone collided. The crow kept falling. But it did not fall gracefully and when it hit the ground it did not move again.

Bareback Jack shook his head, bewildered and in shock. The storm wasn't *coming*. It was here! Now every second truly counted! He spurred Avalanche on but instead of going faster the caterpillar stopped so abruptly that he almost flew off its back!

“What in the fires of Foundation! Are you stoppin’-,” Bareback Jack did not finish his question. Avalanche raised his blue spines to their full height. In front of them a massive tree loomed. The tree was thousands of years old and had probably been long dead for hundreds. It hadn’t had a leaf on its branches in living memory. It did today. But today its leaves were black and moving without wind.

Crows. A murderous murder of crows covered every branch of the old dead tree.

Bareback Jack stood on the caterpillars back, slingshot hanging from his wrist. He whistled at the site and wiped the sweat from his brow. “Gonna need a lot more rocks,” he said to no-one in particular.

## CHAPTER 5

# NO HARD FEELINGS

THE Mountain goat was high up on the mountain when the tickling in the back of his brain became too much for him to bear. The darn bug music was still rolling around in his head and, no matter what he did to distract himself, the song was still there. He sat down on a step near the top of the mountain and chewed on an old branch while he let his mind puzzle over the beetle singing about nothing. Or was the beetle singing about *something*? Beetles just don't sing when they're happy. They don't sing when they are happy. They don't sing when they're in love. They don't sing their children to sleep. The only time they ever sing is when they are about to eat and they only eat the dead. But there was nothing for the beetle to eat anywhere around his mountain. So, there was no reason for the beetle to be singing and yet it had been! It was completely unnerving.

The goat stared down from the mountain. He was too high now, above the clouds. He imagined he could still hear the beetle singing. Oh, it was really getting to him now! He crunched as loud as he could on the old branch trying to make enough noise to drive the beetle song out of his head. When that didn't work he started to sing a song his mother use to sing to him but he couldn't remember if it was 'Bahaaa, bah, bah, bah or bah, bah, bah, bahaa.' He stomped up the mountain higher and higher making as much noise as he could on his way up. He came to a nice ledge at the very top of the mountain where he had plenty of room (room for a mountain goat anyway) to consider things. Looking around for something that might take his mind off the beetle song that had leached its way into his brain he spotted the perfect thing. A large boulder sitting in the V of two smaller mountain might be just the thing to knock that silly song out of his head. He sized up the boulder and gave it taunting billy goat grunt, stomped one hoof into the dirt three times and charge the rock at full speed.

Although the boulder had been there for nearly two million years, wind, rain, snow and sun had eroded enough rock from beneath the boulder to leave it precariously perched on the mountain face. The goat hit the boulder head on at full steam and knocked himself completely silly.

"Oh my aching horns," the goat said to himself. He raised his eyes up and looked to see if he had, at least, cracked the giant rock.

He must have hit his head harder than he thought. The boulder was either no longer there or he had completely smashed it into dust. He shook his head, rubbed his eyes and stood up. His balance was ever so slightly off and he thought he ought to stay still until his head was completely clear again but the mystery of the vanished boulder was too great an attraction. He was not dreaming. It was gone. He looked over the edge where the boulder had been but saw only the tops of clouds. He perked his ears and heard nothing but the wind.

He sniffed around the ledge and puzzled over the mystery of the boulder for a few minutes longer. He must have knocked it completely off of the mountain! My body is strong and my horns solid, he thought to himself, but knocking a boulder off a mountain? That was a first for him! Today was turning into a very odd day. I am a powerful goat indeed! He couldn't wait to tell his friends what he had done. He looked through the crevice the missing boulder had exposed and down the other side of the mountain to where, again, he only saw the tops of the clouds. Again, he heard nothing. No rocks crashed down, no boulder tumbled. "How completely odd," he said and started down the other side of the mountain humming a familiar song that he wasn't quite sure where he had heard before.

He searched for the boulder. The other side of the mountain proved to be much easier climbing. He bounded back and forth looking for the boulder or signs of it crashing down the mountain but found nothing. He was still above the clouds and knew that boulder probably laid at the base of the mountain and had probably caused a bit of a ruckus had it gotten that far.

He stared up into the sky and, even during the day the red winter moon was completely visible. Below him a blanket of clouds whispered and wormed and flowed around the mountain. Below the clouds, he knew, the Goblin hordes gathered to call out a king. Perhaps the boulder had found its way to a large Goblin camp and crushed a hundred or two goblins. Oh boy, the other billies would not believe it! If Mountain goats had kings a feat like crushing Goblins with a stone hurled from his horns would certainly be worthy of a crown. He would certainly be a popular goat.

As he passed through the clouds and came down on the narrow crags and ledges of the mountainside he noticed something strange about the Goblin camps below him. Usually the goblin camps were alive with the noise. Goblin were raucous and the loud. Usually sounds of the Goblins fighting each other, screaming unintelligibly, banging the giant Ushped drums chanting the king chant and the continuous mindless raucous would have filled the air for miles. But today, today something was really, really strange. The camps were quiet. The goat was too high yet to see why but quiet Goblin camps were as odd as boulder bashing goats. He pushed himself further down the mountain and as he looked up toward the horizon he witnessed yet another strange sight. A green fire lit the low clouds on a distant edge of Whisper Canyon.

Even he knew what that meant. He knew Goblin Fire was reserved for one thing and one thing only. The Goblins had a King. The goat stood still and attempted to assess his situation. As he thought through the course of his day he came to another revelation. The beetle, it had been celebrating it said. Now the goat knew why. His hair stood up on his back. His spine came alive with an electric tingle. The goat's heart beat harder and his eyes grew wider as he began to realize the enormity of what was happening here. He took two careful steps back as he now realized that he, too, was in terrible danger. He had to tell someone. No, the beetle was already doing that inadvertently no doubt but still spreading the news. His brothers and sisters on the mountain would not know yet. He could tell them. But the birds had probably done that as well. As far as he knew, in the two days it took for him to get over the mountain, the world may already know. In which case he should stay on the mountain, out of harm's way and wait for the armies of the Free folk to arrive. Which he knew they eventually would. No telling how long it would take though and they wouldn't know what they were walking into. Best the goat make himself useful and act for the good of all! He would have to be brave.

"Well, you did knock a boulder off a mountain," the goat said aloud, "and you are a strong, brave, smart and witty goat at times!" He glanced up the mountain and into the dissipating clouds. "Didn't seem so far away a few minutes ago," he said.

The goat began to think like he thought a brave goat would. His thoughts went something like this: *No ordinary mountain goat would approach a goblin encampment of any size nonetheless a camp of over two or three thousand. No goat, not even the most courageous or strongest would even consider risking his life in such a reckless manner! No, only the Boulder King would dare such an insurmountable task! Was he afraid of becoming a roast goat, goblin party favor? No! No, he was not! Well, maybe a little. Was he the baddest billie this side of the mountain! Well, yes, yes he was! Was he the only billie this side of the mountain? More than likely! Why should he be afraid? The boulder couldn't fight him. A Goblin wouldn't stand a chance! Of course, there were a lot of Goblins. And Goblins don't stand still waiting for a mountain goat to ram them. They also carry war hammers, axes and swords. Part of me is starting to think that I might have hit my head harder than I realized. And so on and so forth he continued thinking as he came to the edge of the Goblin camp where their firelight met the darkness, and he paused at the precipice thinking of his dear mother who nursed him for a whole month and taught him the one song he could still not remember. Pause. Then, why am I thinking in third person narrative?*

He stayed at the edge of the dark, hiding behind rocks covered with a tasty looking thicket that had somehow survived the Goblin's camp fires thus far. He eyed the Goblins carefully. They were a mean bunch here at this camp. One among the several closest to him was clearly the leader, a Goblin captain. Massive horns erupted from everywhere on his armor. Atop his helmet the goat saw, to his discouragement several large pairs of mountain goat horns. *Perhaps I should have thought this all the way through.* His matted hair hung from inside his helmet shadowing the enormous and surely hideous face beneath it. Several Gob-



lins came and put their hands on his shoulders as if they were consoling him but were chastely roared at and quickly made hasty exits. Others were packing, tying up tents tossing large saddle bags over their wicked looking slug mules.

The head Goblin rose from the stump, which had not long ago been a good sized tree, and clung to a red cloak in his hand, He considered the cloak for a moment, looked at the fire and, as he was about to toss it in, stopped. Again he stared at it. He held it out between his arms for a moment and then let out a terrible roar.

The camp stilled. The big Goblin looked around him and yelled, "What! Get back to it. A king waits!" Then he crumpled the big cloak in his hands and tossed it over his shoulder.

The goat watched the cloak unfurl in the air and come down only feet away from him. He couldn't have planned it any better! A goblin cloak! A perfect disguise! He would disappear like a ninja goat into the Goblin hoard and walk among them! The wolf among sheep! First a boulder basher! Now an intrepid spy! *My legend grows!*

The goat stilled himself and took a deep calming breath. 'Now or never,' he thought as he slipped out of the darkness, ducking his head low with his horns to the ground. He tucked his horns under the cloak. With a quick toss of his head the cloak came up off of the ground, spread out in the air above him and fell like a heavy cloud over him.

The goat held his breath. He listened to the camp and waited for the cry that would end the legend of the boulder bashing goat. It did not come. He was just an old goblin cloak wandering around a Goblin camp like any old goblin cloak would on any given goblin night.

*I am a goblin cloak, I am a goblin cloak, I am a goblin cloak.* The goat moved as quietly, head hung low, eyes forward, the cloak a curtain hangin from his horns. He could barely see anything. The cloak draping over his horns allowed him only the narrowest views. He would have to move closer into the camp where it was crowded. There he could get between the shuffling Goblins and, if his luck held out, make his way into a marching column where he knew the Goblins noticed nothing but the back of each others heads.

*I am a goblin cloak, I am a goblin cloak, I am a goblin cloak.* He scampered from the shadow of a tent. Quickly he made his way behind a foul smelling stack of barrels full of goblin grog. From there he could see a goblin slug that would offer him plenty of protection from any suspicious Goblin eyes. Then another brilliant idea came to the goat. 'Yes, oh yes that could work,' he thought. The slug was covered with baskets and saddles and other detritus like goblin bramble. There was still enough room on its back for a mountain goat pretending to be a goblin cloak. He could conceal himself easily there. This could work. He tippy toed five feet. This will work! Another five feet. This has to work! 'Oh I am a genius,' he thought!

Then the camp noise stopped. Nothing moved. It seemed to the goat as if the very air had held its collective breath if that were even possible. Then a voice as heavy as a stone crushed all hope.

“Behold,” a Goblin voice smashed like pinball thunder through the quiet, “the bloodied cloak!”

The goat knew it was over. His terrified feet were stuck. Paralysis was something the goat thought he would never know but yet here he was paralyzed beneath an old, bloody goblin cloak.

“It’s not possible,” a Goblin said.

“The King’s fire is already lit,” said another.

“Some kind of trick?” This voice from behind him said.

“Has to be a trick!”

“Kill it!”

“HOLD,” the thunderous voice the goat recognized as the Goblin captains voice commanded. “GIVE US A RULE,” the voice boomed again and the goat felt himself physically shrink.

“You had better be a king in there,” the captains voice said, now right down close to the goats ears. “If you are anything but a king they will eat you and make you watch,” his voice becoming a whisper, “so, if you know what’s good for you when I pull this cloak off you had better make a rule!”

The goat felt the cloak sink up into the Goblins huge fist. Soon he would be watching his beautiful strong hind legs being salted over a goblin fire. His face started to tingle and tiny pains flickered like cactus needles pricking him all over his body. He had never been dizzy before but he was sure that he was about to be. Quite unexpectedly, as he felt the blanket rising, his mothers song came back to him. *Buh buh buh/ bah bah bah bah/ bah bah bah bah – baaah buuuh!* Of all things, now? This is what he would remember before he was gobbled by Goblins? Oh, he felt the tingling going away. The blanket was halfway off of him still moving but in slow motion. Someone had slowed time down. He remembers then, his mothers face looking down on him while she nuzzled him toward a tiny ledge high up on a mountain. “Jude,” she said his name. Oh he remembered everything now. He remembered the soft meadow grass and his mother’s very grey eyes watching him climb his first slope.

He remembered how she had stood below him on the mountain the first few times he climbed on his own. How she followed below him to break his fall. He remembered too the way she made herself big and stood over him while the mountain lion circled. The way she

took on the big cat without giving any thought as to how she would survive its huge claws and sharp white teeth. How was it that his mother had been so brave.

He felt the blanket come completely off of him now. "Go now, Jude!" Mothers words were harsh but kind, "I'm going to be some other kids mother soon! Go! You can take care of yourself now!"

"It's not a trick! It's a goat!"

"It's not a goat," a goblin called out fro the crowd, "it's a joke!"

Jude had never heard a Goblin laugh before. Not many had. It wasn't that Goblins never laughed it was that they *almost* never laughed. Goblins took their humor very, very, seriously which is why they almost never laughed. But they did make jokes. In eighteen thousand years of goblin memory they had made exactly seven jokes that were still considered funny. Sure they made other jokes but they were all just variations of the original seven and would never be considered anything better than that.

The Goblins had more chance of conjuring a new King, of which there was usually very little, than they had of inventing a new joke. In fact, most believe the original seven jokes came from the same Goblin. Some think that the comedian Goblin may not have been a Goblin at all. After all, eighteen thousand years is a long time to go without at least one Goblin making at least one new joke.

But tonight the Goblins laughed. Some doubled over in pain from laughing so hard. A few collapsed to the ground pounding their fists into the dirt and tears rolled out of their eyes. Jude watched. He knew he could and should run now but something was stopping him. His eyes fell over the crowd of hysterical Goblins and he too laughed a little. Then he looked up at the captain who was not laughing at all. The captains eyes were smiling though. This Goblin was smart Jude could tell. This Goblin had, if any goblin could ever make a claim to having this one could, charisma.

"You had better make your rule," the Goblin captain said in a whisper only to Jude.

The Goblins began to make jokes (not original by any means just jokes based on the original seven which were good enough for the moment at hand).

"Let's eat us a king goat," one said as he raised himself from the ground still holding his belly from laughing pains.

"Iv'e never had joke goat before!"

"Wait," another said," what if he tastes funny too?"

"I'll have his funny bone!"

“Look at him! A goat that funny has to have more than one!”

Jude watched them as they made one another fall out into more fits of laughter. He shook his head. Today had been an odd day indeed: first the beetle, then the boulder and now this. How he wished he would be able to tell this story to his friends. The only one telling his story now would be the Goblins who, sadly were notoriously bad story tellers. Not only would it be a bad story, it would be a bad joke and he would be the butt of it.

It was all too soon that three Goblins pulled themselves out of their laughing fits and decided something in them more primordial needed satisfying. Still smiling one pulled out a large hatchet and smiled at Jude.

“C’mon and get some goat jokey,” he said and caused another wave a laughter to ripple across the horde.

‘Wow,’ Jude thought, ‘a witty Goblin.’

The three Goblins approached him. The witty one tested his thumb on the hatchet. The other two pulled knives from somewhere beneath their confusing armor. All three drooled.

“Maybe,” the Goblin captain said with a light hearted tone, “we should, before we eat it, ask it for a rule?”

That remark caused another huge wave of laughter to barrel its way through the Goblins. A lot of the Goblins went back into laughing fits. Not the three coming to carve him up though, Jude noticed. Their eyes were fixated on him now. Like the mountain lions that came for him when he was just a babe they saw him, not as a goat, but as a full belly and a nap.

*You have to take care of yourself now Jude.*

“Goblins do not eat goats,” Jude declared and stomped a foot into the dirt.

“Did you hear that boys?” The hatchet Goblin said to his two accomplices. “We don’t eat goats!” The other two snickered. The laughter died away and the other Goblins looked on. The idea of the goat making a rule stirred some thoughts. Could a goat be a king? Jude saw the question on some faces. On most faces he saw only the lust for his meat.

“Goblins DO NOT eat goats,” he screamed a billy goat scream and put his horns forward. “I’m warning you!”

“What’s your name, goat?” Asked hatchet Goblin.

Jude put his head farther down in defiance and yelled, “I am Boulder Smasher! And I am going to smash you three!”

The hatchet Goblin smiled, drool dripping off his tusk like teeth.

Then a loud boom shook the mountain. The hatchet Goblin stopped smiling. Another loud boom, closer this time, ceased all laughter.

The captain looked at the goat named Jude, his charismatic face becoming a question mark.

The hatchet Goblin took a step back. Jude felt the air around him change.

BOOM! BOOM!

A horrible grinding, screaming scraping sound echoed from everywhere. The Goblins looked in apprehension all around them and at Jude. They were mistaken? How can a goat be king? What bad magic was happening here?

The three Goblins that had been so hungry for him took another step back and, as they did, all three looked up to see the rising sun blotted out by a huge shadow.

Jude had indeed knocked a boulder off the top of the mountain. It had not fallen far when it got caught up on an old dead tree. The tree had held the weight of the boulder but only just. The vulture that noticed the Goblins beginning to pack up their camp also noticed the perfect place to watch and wait for the Goblins to leave. Goblins always left something for the vultures to pick over. The vulture circled the boulder resting on the dead tree for a time before he decided to perch there. His talons came down and he landed gently on the boulder.

It was more weight than the dead tree could bear. The long dead roots tore from the mountain and the boulder sailed off of the tree clearing hundreds of feet before striking the side of the mountain and bouncing another thousand feet. Again it hit the mountain and again it sailed through the air gaining more momentum. As its velocity increased the path of the giant boulder falling through the air brought it rocketing toward the curving and upward facing slopes of Moonclimb Mountain. It hit again and shot down the loose rocks nearing the base of the mountain where nature and time had turned that particular part of the mountain into a perfect launching ramp.

The boulder screamed and scraped down the ramp and then shot up off of into the air one last time.

The three hungry Goblins were flattened with a loud earth shattering kaboom. Dust and wind blew out from beneath the boulder as it cratered into the dirt. Loose rocks from the mountain clattered down in tapering applause.

All was quiet when the dust cleared. The Goblins stood wide eyed looking at Jude.

“GOBLINS DON’T EAT GOATS,” one screamed as he fell prostrating himself in front of Jude! Then all the Goblins began chanting. The captain fell on one knee in front of Jude the Boulder Smashing Goat, “I don’t know how you did that but if you want to survive longer than a day you will follow me into that tent,” he pointed to a large round, red tent, “over there. Now.”

Jude did as he was told. Following the captain over to the tent they passed by the boulder. Jude looked down into the large impression where he could just make out a goblin hand holding onto a hatchet.

“Sorry fellas,” he said looking down into the hole, “no hard feelings.”

## CHAPTER 6

# BRING ME THE GREENHORN

The tent smelled. It made Yusef think of Kismet. Kismet always smelled bad after getting wet, but the tent smelled like a hundred wet Kismets that had not gotten a bath in a long, long time! Yusef had heard the word dank before and even used it a couple of times. Now the word dank would forever mean the how he felt being in this tent.

“It’s not much now but when the Hordes arrive this sad covering,” she swept her hand out in front of her, “this will become a palace of treasures!”

Part of him was still very busy trying to convince the rest of him that this whole thing was a dream. He looked around the tent. Five of his bedrooms would have fit in this tent easily. The ground was covered with animal furs of every imaginable and unimaginable animal. They were worn and old and mostly falling apart. He looked down at his bare feet. The fur he was standing on may have been white once. It was moldy looking now and the bottoms of his feet felt damp. Chains holding something not candles ran down from the twisted branches that supported the roof of the tent. They gave off a strange amber light that flickered like dying light bulbs. Some were brighter and if light could breathe, Yusef thought, this is what it would look like.

Derdunger walked into the shadows of the tent and returned holding a large box. She sat the box down in front of Yusef. It was an old box. It looked as worn as everything else in the tent but it didn’t quite fit. There was something wrong with this box though. It had been painted to look like a treasure chest complete with painted padlock and loose gold and gems scattered toward the bottom of the box. On the top of the box a pirate with an eye patch, a black beard, a pirate hat and a parrot had been carefully painted. Below the pirate the words *Har! Here Be Treasure!* had been painted with gold paint lined with a deep blue paint so that it looked like it was stating off of the box. Parts of the box had lost paint and a more paint flaked from every side. Even the pirate had some missing buttons and hair. His eye was gone then back again. Wait a minute. Did the pirate just wink at him? A trick of the weird light maybe?

Derdunger swatted a lamp hanging above Yusef’s head. “Wake up you lazy torch-head!” The light grew brighter and Yusef saw the box more clearly now. It was an old toy box!

“What are you doing with an old toy box?” Yusef asked the Goblin.

The Goblins eyes went just as wide as when he had come from under the blanket. "Toy Box," she uttered in a whisper, her eyes drifting off to some shadow in the tent. "Toy box," she said again and chuckled. Again she said toy box and her chuckle became laughter. Then her laughter became a hysterical cackling growl. Yusef began to back away from the insane thing in front of him. The Goblin held her side and motioned for Yusef to wait. "Wait!" She gasped. "Toy Box! Ha! Do you know what we have called this for five-hundred years?" She asked rhetorically, still chuckling and holding her side. "We called it The Holy Holder of the One Eyed Parrot King!" She broke into laughter again.

Yusef thought about it for a minute. He was pretty sure that no one was making painted pirate toy boxes five hundred years ago! Then again there was the old church that had paintings in it that were five hundred years old. So maybe there were five hundred year old toy boxes. Dang it, he thought to himself, why was I thinking about old stuff? I'm in another world with monsters who think I'm their king! Old toy boxes don't matter now!

Derdunger smiled at him, "Would you like to open it?" Her hand brushed lovingly over the toy box. "It's yours now. Only if you like it my king." Yusef looked at the box. His forehead wrinkled and his eyebrows scrunched together. Derdunger's smile went away. "Open the box, my king!" She demanded.

Yusef looked up in surprise. "Why should I?" He demanded right back!

Derdunger cringed and backed away. "Oh, my King," she said in a hushed apologetic voice, "I only wanted to be the first to honor you with gifts! Other Goblin will give you baubles worth more trinkets but I wanted to be the first to pay tribute to you!"

Maybe there might be something in the box that Yusef wanted but what he really wanted was more than likely not in there. He sat down criss cross applesauce on the fur under him. The monster wanted him to open the box. He wanted answers. He put his hands together, stretched out his arms and cracked his knuckles. Only one knuckle made a tiny pop. Derdunger watched him carefully. This was his negotiations and compromise position. His mother always did the same thing when he didn't get what he wanted and threw a tantrum. Sweep the hair back, raise the eyebrows, mouth 'okay' without saying it out loud, hands together, palms out, stretch arms out straight and listen to the knuckles pop like a deck of cards being shuffled.

"You want me to open the box?" Yusef began, doing his best imitation of his mother, "I'll open the box when you answer my questions." Very satisfied with the impersonation of his mother, Yusef grinned. Derdunger's face remained contemplative. She nodded her head.

"Why am I here?" He asked the monster on the other side of the toy box.

Her face wrinkled up. She reached up and played with a point on one of her horns, "Why, my king, you are here to be our King and lead us into glory!"



“That’s really not what I meant,” Yusef said. He had a feeling he wasn’t going to get the answers that he needed from the big Goblin monster. “What I mean is how did it happen? How did I get here?” He asked anyway. “And can you tell me what Obekey means?”

Derdunger sat down, still taller than Yusef, behind the toy box. She blew a long breath from between her lips. A Goblin would not ask questions like this. A Goblin King would have known what and how and why it had come. She had been sure, when he came from beneath the sheet, that he was Obekey. But now, the questions, the doubt in him, the momentary fear she sensed, she wasn’t sure. She had never been close to an Obekey. She had never seen one, actually. She had, however, heard plenty of stories about the Obekey. More than any creature on this earth, the power of the Obekey was unrivaled. When she was younger, there had been an Obekey that came into this world. The Goblin King Gurmaltigu wanted to take the power of the Obekey for himself. He marched his army through and over the Black Perch, largest mountain on all earths. It took him a year and so many months to find his way across the mountain. In that time the Obekey learned of the Goblin Kings desire for his power. When Gurmaltigu came over the mountain and had the Obekey’s castle in sight a massive storm came over the Goblin army. The next day the Goblin King and his army found themselves back on the other side of the mountain. They chose not to cross again. The Obekey had also befriended or charmed a certain midnight dragon that had a taste for moose. At least that is how Goblins tell the story.

As a matter of fact, all she had heard were stories of Obekey and their powers. There was nothing to prove the truth in the stories. For all Derdunger knew, all the Obekey stories could be made up. Now Derdunger was faced with a big problem. She had lit the green fire, the signal of the Goblin King. She had lit the green fire once before. Four hundred years ago when she thought a King was about to reveal himself. She had gotten so excited at the prospect of another King that she failed to recognize the Pixie magic beneath the empty cloak. The Pixies had dared to play one of their despicable jokes during the Goblin ceremony of the red winter moon. When the Goblin Horde arrived they laughed her as they tore her armor away and stole her baubles and left her with nothing! They exiled her from the horde until the real King revealed himself and passed judgment on her foolishness. She would not live through another mistake. She should have tested this Obekey before she lit the fire. She cursed herself for being so impetuous and impatient to light the signal. She had to find out if this child was indeed an all powerful Obekey. She had to do it quickly. If he was not Obekey she would eat him. It would, she knew, be her last meal.

She opened the toy box lid, reached inside and pulled a bauble out. She let the lid fall and as she did, tossed the bauble over to the boy. It seemed to float in the air a moment just before it fell into the boys hands. He looked down, startled but also amused, “A plastic robot?” He asked looking up at her. He reached for the bauble saying, “Why would I want a plastic – .” As he touched it everything around Derdunger and the boy lit up. Little tongues of lightning shot out from the bauble, wrapped around the boy like glowing smoke and explored the entire tent like cats whiskers.

“Obekey,” she said aloud. His power surged and pulsed through the tent. Her doubts disappeared.

Yusef had watched the Goblin like he used to watch his father when he made excuses for things. He couldn't pick him up from school because the office needed him to stay late. The weather didn't agree with him, things were just too busy for him to get away. The excuses were too numerous to list. He could tell when his father was about to lie. He lied to Yusef so much that Yusef got really good at spotting other peoples lies. Now he could tell when anyone was about to lie to him and he could definitely tell when they did lie to him. It was his superpower. He was not too sure if he could tell when a monster was about to lie to him. He watched her though, and she gave no signs that would lead him to believe that she was going to lie to him. Of course, she was a monster and he had never been lied to by a monster – well not a real one anyway!

The monster that called itself Derdunger played with her horns, rubbed the beards on her chin, and stared over the toy box at him. She looked down at her lap and blew out a long breath from between her lips. To Yusef this meant that he had won and soon he would have the answers to his questions! Or, with his luck, the monster would tell him that she didn't know anything. He couldn't let his future hinge on the monsters answers though. He had to figure out what he was going to do if she didn't know. While she thought about Yusef was making plans of his own. He knew he could run fast. He did not know if he could outrun a Goblin.

She was taking a long time to answer. Yusef planted his hands firmly on the ground. He started to move his feet out from under him. The Toy Box opened! Derdunger reached in and grabbed something which she then lobbed into the air toward him.

“Whoa!” He thought or said but wasn't sure of either. The thing in the air slowed down and seemed to float for a second. ‘What the heck did I do that?’ He thought and the thing dropped into his hands. The way the Goblin lobbed it should have put the thing way over his head. But it didn't go over his head. It stopped in mid air.

Without looking it Yusef could tell it was something familiar. He turned it over in his hand. A plastic robot? It was not a magical treasure! It was a crappy piece of plastic. Was this a joke? He looked at the Goblin across from him. Its eyes were getting wide again. He held the robot toy tight in his hand feeling a little angry.

“What would I want with a plastic –,” he started to say. He may have finished the question or he may not have. Strings of liquid lightning blew out from his hand and engulfed the world.

*His name is Leo. He is eight years old. It is raining in the sunshine and a new family is moving into the house across the street. A little boy his age jumps out of the back of an old timey pick up truck. He is black and Leo knows they probably won't get to be friends.*

*But they do get to be friends. They get to be best friends. The other boy is Martin. He is a year older than Leo. Their friendship is a secret. Not a soul knows or will ever know of the friendship they share. Martin says to Leo as they sit backs against a stone wall behind the old baptist church that if the people around here found out about them they would both hang from a tree. Probably not the same tree though, Leo says and Martin stares back at him with an incredulous frown wrinkling down his forehead. Come to think of it, Leo continues, how do they pick hangin' trees? I mean; I ain't never seen a tree labeled Colored and never seen one says Whites neither. Maybe same tree, says Martin, but different sides. They laugh the scariness off. The world does not.*

*They don't talk anymore about what they can't do together. Everything they can do together they do. One day Martin shows up with a bruised face and a swollen eye. I'd say you have a black eye, Leo says, but that'd be redundant.*

*That day is the day Leo gives Martin his prized Pez dispenser. It is a plastic blue robot full of Pez candy. Martin takes it and cries. Leo says it will bring him luck. It does for a while. Martin keeps the Pez dispenser under his mattress. Leo brings him peppermint Pez to keep it full.*

*For Christmas that year Martin gives Leo a wooden ukulele he made at his fathers wood shop. Leo says that it's too big and he won't be able to hide it and together they can't figure out a way Leo would be able to keep it without someone figuring out where he got it from. They dig a hole by the old stone wall. Martin makes a box for the ukulele and they hide it in the hole. By the next summer Leo has learned how to play three songs from the radio and is working on a song for Martin.*

*That summer passes quickly. They spend all their time in the woods making up songs and eating Pez candies from the blue robot. Martin decided that their gifts to one another should live in the same hidey hole. Every night, before they return to their houses, the ukulele and the robot go into the same hole. Leo jokes that they are going to need a bigger hole in fifty years. Martin laughs and says they should just move away together. Both of them know there is nowhere in the world for their kind of friendship.*

*One night Leo's father takes him on a camping trip with a group of other boys and their fathers. They are gone for an entire week. He is no good in the woods with these other boys. They are all tougher than him. He knows the boys don't really like him. They are all nice to him because the fathers are around. He knows if they were not there they'd be using pieces of him for fish bait.*

*On the morning they leave all the fathers are gathered round Leo's father. They all pat him on the back and shake his hand erstwhile stealing embarrassed glances at Leo. A couple of the fathers even give his father a hug. Leo is sure something is very wrong. He's never seen his father hug another man. Not even his own brother. On the way home he falls asleep. He wakes up three hundred miles later. His father tells him they had to move and they wanted it to be a surprise! Only three hundred more miles to go and they'd be wearing cowboy hats and eating barbecue.*

*Martin figured it out way before Leo did. The day Leo left to go camping the movers were loading up all the furniture from his house. When he turns thirteen he digs up the box and takes the robot Pez dispenser and the ukulele to the woods. He throws them both off a high cliff and walks away. He*

*made a vow that he would never think of Leo again. The next day he comes back and hikes down below the cliff looking for the things he threw away. They are not there. He searches until dark but finds nothing.*

*Every year he returns to the old stone wall, digs up the box meant for their gifts and puts a poem in it. He hopes one day that Leo will come back. Martin will make him a nicer ukulele and Leo will put all Martin's poems to music. After the hole he returns to the cliff where he threw the gifts into the void. He hikes down year after year looking for the presents they gave each one another. Year after year he finds nothing.*

*Pixies smelled the ukulele and the robot the night Martin threw them over the cliff. They sat on the forest floor for all of seven minutes before the pixies dragged them into hole that opened up like a mouth between the roots of a tree.*

What was that? Yusef dropped the plastic robot on the fur as he stood up and backed away from it. "What was that?" He yelled the question at Derdunger. "I need to leave," he said. "I need to leave and I want to go away from this place and, and," he realized he was crying. What he felt about Leo and Martin was like he had lived a brief part of their lives. No, not their lives, but their entire world! He could remember what it felt like to have Leo's fingers playing his strings! His *strings* like *he* was a *ukulele*! "Oh my God! I dispensed candy out of my neck!" Yusef looked at Derdunger who was still sitting on the floor with wide eyes, her mouth expressionless and slightly opened. Yusef wasn't going to stick around and feel anything like that again King or not!

What he had felt when he touched that plastic robot wasn't a dream that was for sure! He hadn't ever felt anything like that in his life. He was trembling. He felt like someone had just stuffed his head with a lifetime of memories and they weren't all good! He stumbled his way toward the tent door. Racing, stumbling, holding his chest and wiping the tears a way from his eyes Yusef reached the door and fell through the opening. When he put his foot down the ground was not there. He was a hundreds of feet above the ground and he was falling!

And then he wasn't falling. He felt a his shirt tight around him and then a rough hand grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back into the tent. He fell onto fur ground. Derdunger looked down at him. Leo and Martin were still in his head. They were so sad. Yusef began crying again.

"There was only residue on that bauble," she said mostly to herself. "Look what he did with only the smallest magic." The Goblin pulled back the tent and yelled something down to the other nine monsters that were, presumably, still on the ground.

What they saw from the ground was the huge neck of a Ukulele made of frozen lightning holding the big tent hundreds of feet above the ground.

Derdunger looked out the opening of the tent toward moonclimb mountain. She could see some of the fires already going out. The horde was beginning to move. It would be a day or two before any arrived. She would have time now. She would have to give the King the answers he searched for. She knew she didn't know everything he would ask. She would do her best. The goblins kept only one book and that was the rule book. Their history was all passed down in stories they told each other. There were many stories about the place where the Goblin Kings waited for their time return to the world and conquer it. She had an idea that those stories weren't all as true as the Goblins would like to believe. What she was realizing now was that the Goblins didn't really know much about anything when it came to the magic of this world. She knew it had all been in books once. All those books had been burned by the pretend King Brumixgig thousands of years ago. The Goblins had kept no books since him. No king had ever made a rule against Goblins keeping books. She wondered why no Goblin had started keeping a written record since that King. Maybe she would start with this king. Obekey, Goblin King she thought. Yes she would title the book that. No, that didn't seem right. His name, she thought, she did not ask him his name. Derdunger turned to her new King.

He was fast asleep on the old fur floor. His magic even worked when he was sleeping. She wondered how much magic was in the world where the Obekey came from. How did they harness it? How did they use it? She had so many questions for the Obekey but they could wait. All of her questions could wait. Her vindication was near. No Goblin would laugh at her now. The most magic this world had seen in hundreds of years was sleeping here in *their* tent. How something so small could hold that much power...another great mystery. The magic he made here today was worth thousands of trinkets. The pixies had never found a single bauble that held that much magic. The Obekey had drawn, out of a bauble that wasn't worth half a trinket, more magic that she had ever seen.

Her Goblin kin were waiting below. She yelled to them. Too far for them to hear my voice. She turned around and carefully stepped over the sleeping king. Somewhere in here, she searched through the 'Toy Box' and pulled out a large rainbow colored pencil. Then she found a book of paper. She carefully pulled out one sheet and set the rest of the book back into the toy box. She wrote quickly on the paper, wrapped the paper over around her dagger and dropped it down to the Goblins below.

Small Endlegub ran and grabbed the paper wrapped dagger. He knew what it was and immediately ran the dagger over to Sulingurg. She watched tall Sulingurg unwrap the paper from the dagger. Sulingurg being the only other Goblin out of the ten that could read as well read the note and signaled her with a waving hand. She watched him bark orders to twins and watched as they ran off toward the mountain and toward the Goblin hordes. Ordinarily they would never go into the horde. They, too, were outcasts. But today they had become anything but outcasts. Today they held the status of royalty.

"Go my friends, go and bring me the Greenhorn," she said to herself. She watched the moon rising again over the mountain. She had not felt this content and this excited in a long, long time. She felt a warmth in her cheeks and gladness twinkled behind her eyes. The

darkness came and the moon glowed over the canyon valley for the last night of the red winter moon. She would remember this night for the rest of her life.

She did remember it for the rest of her life, just not the way she expected she would. Contented just to sit and watch the night pass into dawn from the floating tent, Derdunger dreamt of the things she might accomplish with her new King. And just as sudden as the Obekey's lightning, her feeling of contentment vanished.

In the distance, at the base of the mountain, a green spear shot through her heart. Another camp had lit Green Goblin Fire. The green pillar of light was another Goblin declaring a king. Two Kings? There had never been such a thing.

"Hurry my friends," she whispered as the dawn swallowed the moon, "hurry and bring me the Greenhorn."

## CHAPTER 7

# FAR SOUTH OF SMART

This is awful, awful, awfully bad. Kisser Fairy crouched and pushed back into the shadows of the dead tree. She was a brave Fairy and she was not one to scare easily, but today she felt fear icing her veins. It was paralyzing. Kisser knew what fear could do to a Fairy. She had seen Fairies make the poorest of choices when fear got into their brains. Peanut butter brain is what she called it. She knew she had to think. Every cell in her wings told her to fly as fast as she could away from this place but something else was telling her to stay. That something else might be fear, might be curiosity, or it might be her damnable instinct for getting knee deep in trouble. She stilled herself and took a deep breath. "Quiet your mind," she whispered to herself. She was not close enough to the Goblins for them to hear her and, she hoped, not to smell her. Goblins had an extremely keen nose for sniffing out magic; probably because they had none of their own and probably wouldn't ever. She peered out from behind the tree.

Nine Goblins circled one another talking in whispers. Surprise still glazing their eyes. They were happy, she thought, but confused too. Their new king was Obekey. How that happened she would never know. The Queen would know. The tree would know. She wondered if they already knew. Once, when Kisser was a smaller, her mother had taken her to listen to the Queen teaching older Fairies how to listen to the vibrations of the tree. She told them if they listened hard enough the vibrations would become images and the images would have voice and stories. She told them when they understood how to listen they would be able to see things far away from here. Then she looked at Kisser, at least that's how she remembered it, and said, "One day, if you listen long enough and let yourself *into* the sound of the tree you can see things on the other side of the world when they are happening." The Queen and the tree were tied together somehow into the invisible but universal magic that permeated every living thing. Together, the tree and the Queen listened to the pulse of the world. They could sense things that no other creatures here could but, when it came to the presence of an Obekey, nothing was sure anymore. The Queen told her the same thing would happen if someone from this world fell into the Obekey's world. She could not even pretend to know how that would work.

Whenever an Obekey showed up everything got a little crazy. Even an Obekey that possessed little magic could really upset the balance of the world that so many creatures fought so hard to keep. One Obekey in particular had nearly destroyed their world when she tried to take all the magic from this world back to hers. The dragons had tried to tell her that magic was not something that one possessed but was an energy that could be focused if you were open to it. Things did not go too well for that Obekey. Kisser Fairy knew she

didn't own magic but she still liked to call the magic she expressed *her* magic. She was sort of smug about the *way* she expressed her magic. A lot of Fairies tried to copy what she did with petunias and warthogs but no one had ever gotten close to getting it right! And that wasn't even her best! Most of her best stuff she did when no-one was around to see it. She had seen other fairies do some pretty incredible things with their, or, *the* magic. She often tried to copy magic that other fairies expressed and sometimes she *could* but most of the time she just ended up frustrated. The Queen said that this was because every creature experienced magic differently and the magic experienced them as well and what came out of that beautiful union was, every time, a very unique expression of two worlds uniting. What she really wanted to do was talk magic to the tree the way the Queen did. Ooooh she would give anything for that. Just an hour talking with the tree would be amazing! The Queen had told her once, that talking magic with the tree was like dreaming while you were awake. She had said the world and everyone in it was connected in so many ways you wouldn't think it possible. Kisser Fairy had said she knew everything was connected and she didn't need magic to know that! The Queen smiled and told her that one day soon she would be able to dream with the tree and she would know just how many connections that she, Kisser Fairy, had with this world and the worlds she could not yet see. Everyone knew there were other worlds. She had never been to any but she had been promising herself that, in the event, if it should ever happen that she found herself bored, she would definitely consider traveling to another world. Although she knew it was not likely that she would ever want to find herself anywhere but here. Well, she thought to herself, not here exactly.

The Goblins below were busying themselves with housekeeping. One of them had a broom! He was sweeping the dirt. The others were pulling out little cages and hanging them around the camp. Kisser felt something wash through her suddenly, painfully. She felt lonely and trapped. It wasn't her that was feeling it though. She was picking up on some other creatures emotions. Some sad magic here, she thought. In a glance she knew. The lamps the goblin were hanging around their camp weren't lamps at all Yeeyoo cages. Yeeyoo were mysterious. They never spoke but they did sing. The saying goes, 'When you hear Yeeyoo song nothing in the forest is wrong.' But the Yeeyoo lived *wherever* life was in harmony. Another saying, 'Lost in the night follow the Yeeyoo light' was a testament to how they would glow in the dark. When they gathered together they could turn the night into day. And here the Goblins had them in cages! Cages of all things!

Seeing the Yeeyoo caged by Goblins was exactly what Kisser needed. She felt the fear melt away. Her blood moved in her faster now. Fear of the Goblin and the Obekey Goblin King had turned into crashing waves of boiling anger and Kisser's call to arms trumpeted from her heart. She wondered how long Goblins had been using the Yeeyoo as lamps! Lamps! Never-mind how long, she thought. It's got to stop now. But she would risk everything if she tried to free the Yeeyoo now. No, the first thing she had to do was tell the Queen. Three days from home, she thought.

Kisser felt despair poking into her brain and inviting her to come and pick out caskets. There was nothing for her to do here. She hung her head momentarily wishing for the power of a mountain Golem so she could smash the Goblins below her. Wishes aren't getting you



anywhere closer to home, she thought, still looking for some way to free the poor Yeeyoo. Nothing she could do. Not right now anyway. "Procrastination," she said out loud, lept skyward and kicked her wings into high gear.

Fairies could fly fast by themselves and when they employed magic they could move like a rocket. Kisser was tempted, She had to think clearly now. If she used her magic here the Goblins would smell her in a heartbeat. Goblins were good at a few things: War, deceit, torture, making terrible messes out of just about everything, and catching Fairies. If she went around the Goblin horde it would add another day to her trip. If she opened up the throttle on her magic to boost her speed every Goblin below would smell her. She might make it though. But if she didn't the Queen might not know until it's too late. Below her the Goblin pilgrimage to the new king was slow moving. They were not moving fast. The farther she flew from the King's camp the slower they seemed to move, the less certain they seemed. Most of them, she remembered had never had a King. The many young looked to the few old enough to remember when they did have a King. Kisser wondered how many Goblins in the hordes were old enough to remember. Not many she thought. Not many, she hoped.

A black shank roared through her hopes. An arrow from below! They saw her! Sometimes you make choices, she thought, sometimes they're made for you. Kisser pulled a breath deep into her lungs, focused it into her wings and let the magic fly out of her like a whip cracking through the air.

"High octane rocket burn baby! Whooooohooo!" Kisser pulled a pair of old goggles down over her eyes and let the magic surge through her body and felt her wings split the wind!

If you had been watching Kisser fly over the Goblin camp you might have thought she was an overly large dragonfly. When she let her magic out you would have seen that overly large dragonfly disappear, as if by magic, right in front of your eyes. Yes, Fairies can fly that fast! She would not be able to fly that fast for long especially not over Goblin hordes. Any magic here the Goblins would have sniffed out and sacked by now for sure. No place for a fast recharge. She had to be cunning now. Ninja Fairy, she thought. I gotta be like a ninja! Her burst of magic had taken her over half of the hordes' scattered camps and marching columns but the next half of the horde looked even thicker. That half looked like they were waiting for the traffic to clear. She had to find a place to land before her wings gave out completely. The arrow had forced her to get above the clouds. She had to get closer to the ground to find a place to hide. Getting closer was a risk but falling out of the sky over a Goblin horde was a death sentence.

She dropped down below the clouds and focused a mile out. Nothing but Goblins ahead for miles. Even if she did find somewhere to hide the magic residue on her wings would give her away faster than if she stood on a hill and announced herself to passerby Goblins.

“We have a wonderful gilded model over here with plenty a velvety padding,” she felt despair budging into her brain again uninvited, ringing, “should make eternity nice and comfortable for your – oh you’re not going to care about your rotting corpse! You’ll be basking in a salty Goblin stew!” Kisser pushed the cackling laughter out of her head. That’s not *looking*, Kisser, she said to herself.

She saw a hill rising up out of the horde. No, it was not a hill. It’s a Goblin slug. An *armored* Goblin slug. It was her only choice. She tucked her wings and dove. The slug came up fast. The spiked armor that had looked like a pin cushion seconds ago now came at her like massive spears. She dove left, adjusted her dive, released her wings just above the slugs head, held her breath and plunged between the slugs thick skin and its armor. “Ack,” she coughed, “gross!” She made her way up the slugs back and as deep into the armor as she dared.

Had they seen her? Maybe, but she doubted it. She held her breath and waited for the alarm. None came.

The Goblins would still smell the magic but they wouldn’t find her here. They wouldn’t find her unless they took all the armor and gear of the poor, dumb creature and that was not likely to happen. Too bad the snail wasn’t going her way. She was going to lose ground hiding in here. On the flip side, the slug was a slow creature. It would be nightfall soon. She could launch herself again when the night came...she hoped. She pushed her heels into the slug slime and tried to make herself comfortable while the magic flowed back into her. “Kisser season,” she said to herself recounting the steps before she saw the Obekey, “stupid fairy.”

She imagined her friends sitting and wondering where she was. Tree would say something like, “Oh you know Kisser, she’s probably off convincing warthogs to plant petunias!” And Grounder would say, “Probably gone north again do whatever it is she does up there.” Edawad, “Nah, you guys don’t give her enough credit! She’s off defending the weak and the helpless. That’s just the kind of Fairy she is.” Burg would then say, “Well,” and he’d rub his belly with both hands, “you can bet wherever she is now, whatever she’s doing it ain’t smart.”

“And you’d be right Burg,” she said quietly to herself. “Where I am now is so, so, so far south of smart.” She pushed herself into the slug slime and listened to the Goblins grunting march.

## CHAPTER 8

# JUST A COUPLE OF KIDS

Warthog watched as the goat king and their captain disappeared into the tent. He sniffed the air and plucked a stick out from between his teeth. He eyed the tent, 'Goat would have been good today,' he thought to himself. He was hungry as were the rest of his companions. They had only brought enough food with them to last through the Red Winter Moon and then just barely enough. They were a ravenous crew and had hearty appetites and goats were a goblin favorite. He looked over at the giant boulder that had pressed his comrades into the pages of history. A goat king. Ridiculous, was the word that sprang into mind and stuck there like a hungry tick.

There had never been two kings before. There should never be two kings. He had never heard any goblin stories of two kings before but he was not an expert. There had definitely never been a *goat king* before! Warthog stuck the stick in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. A Hob' would know. He scratched his chin and stood up from the dying fire. Goblins don't eat goats, the goat had said. 'Well,' thought Warthog, 'this Goblin does eat goats, he will continue to eat goats and no goat will ever be a king to me!' He spit the stick out of his mouth and stared out over the canyon to the other green pillar of fire burning in the far distance. He wondered what the rules the other king had made. Surely nothing so ridiculous as taking goats out of his and every other Goblins diet.

He grabbed his axe, helmet and bag and headed toward the Hob's camp. He was an old Goblin and had fought alongside many kings but he would never fight for a goat! Even if the goat could call boulders from the sky to smash his enemies. He counted the kings he had served while he walked through the crowds of confused and hungry comrades. Most of them had never known the rule of a Goblin King. They had never felt the power surge through their veins! They had never heard the stampeding blood drums thundering in their hearts! He pitied them. Even if they did feel it now it would not be the same. No goat could summon the war gods of the Horde. Even if, and it was a huge if, the goat could do that he would not let the call of a goats gods be his call. He would not bah like a goat into battle! He mumbled curses all the way out of his camp.

A Hob is as mystical as a Goblin gets. Though they claimed to have a mastery of magic, Warthog knew that they possessed nothing of the sort. They did however have keen minds. Somehow a Hobgoblin kept Goblin history, thousand of years of it, in their heads. Warthog

had no idea how. He couldn't remember what he'd had for breakfast. It wasn't goat. Hob-goblins were few and always the oldest of the Goblins. The Hob he was going to see was the youngest of all the Hobs and looked it too. He was only the size of a Goblet and his horns were all wrong. Warthog thought he was a Goblet when he first saw him.

Brumixgig was King when he had met the little Hob. When Warthog had sat in his first Council with Brumixgig he had thought the Hob the Kings Goblet. The talk of that first council was as it had been with all previous Kings. Warthog remembered the dull droning chit chat on the finer points of Goblin rule making. Many Goblin Kings prided themselves on their rules. They often spent months reveling in the words they chose to make their rules and some spent years perfecting their pros before they push them down in the Great Book. Brumixgig would have been such a King had it not been for the little Hob sitting next to him.

Warthog thought back and smiled to himself. The day he met the little Hob had promised to hold nothing but boring rule talk. The king had called on the Greatest warriors from Horde and so it was that, when Warthog made his reluctant arrival, he made note of the tiny Goblet sitting amongst the hulking shapes of the great Goblin warriors. He was strange looking even for a Goblet. He had three horns, not two, four or six horns sprouting from his head. His eyes were not the eyes of a Goblet. A Goblet would have been in wonder of the mighty warriors surrounding him. A Goblet would have had an expression of bewilderment or surprise or boredom. This one had eyes that took everything in. He watched and said nothing while the other Goblins praised Brumixgig for his decisive word craft and his elegant yet strong rule making. The brutish Goblin warriors would lavish the new king with compliments, baubles, food, wine, weapons, armor and promises of fealty. All they really wanted was war and magic.

The three horned Goblet knew it even when, it looked too Warthog, the King did not. Not every conjured King was a good Warborn Goblin King. Some just wanted magic, some wanted praise and some didn't know what to want. A Warborn Goblin King that came from beneath the blood cloak thirsted for magic and war, made their rules quickly and marched before the sunset of their first day. Brumixgig had already loafed for months. He called all the greatest Goblins to him instead of letting them find him in battle. Instead of giving other Goblins a chance to be blooded, he let himself be placated by adulation and gifts. It made Warthog angry but he knew that his anger would not last for very much longer. He was already feeling the Kings euphoric effects and knew the closer he was the more euphoric he would feel. That's how it was with Kings. Their presence was intoxicating and their righteousness was irrefutable! Not so much with a goat King. Warthog had felt it with every King before Brumixgig and it lasted until their death. Once they were gone though, their intoxicating fog following them into the fires of the pyre, the Goblins found themselves lost again. Just as he brought them together and turned them into the unstoppable Horde his death would bring confusion and aimlessness. The times after Kings could be good and could be bad. A good king dies with his Goblins fed and wanting for nothing for years. There had been few of the good kind. Chances were more Goblins would find themselves starving soon after a kings death. Warthog remembered how, at the time, he might of felt sorry for himself and Goblin-kind had he not been so enamored. The King had one of the

most superb jawlines he had ever seen. Of course his glorious moose antler helmet wasn't anything to sneeze at either.

But he had been and as the King spoke he fell into his words just as everyone in his council did except for, maybe, the young Hob. Warthog could only remember, upon reflection long after the unfortunate demise of King Brumixgig what happened during that first council with the young Hob. The Goblins, meaning the King mostly, were discussing the poor shape of the Horde. Warthog came in and was ushered to a fine caterpillar rug in-between the Hob and a giant Goblin he did not know.

"The Horde is hardly the Horde I remember," the King went on, "of course, I do not remember who I was or when that was or if it was. But that makes no difference now! The horde shall be as I remember! We will be great again! We will be the most magnificent Horde!" And on he went with the ridiculous babble of Kings. But we were all inspired and we felt his blood in us and it roared and clawed and gloried in its own awakening!

The Hob, however, sat stoic and still like he had not heard the king or like he had heard it all before. The King was about to begin another extemporaneous and, no doubt, inspiring speech the Hob reached up and grabbed his ear. It was something that no other Goblin would even think of doing less he loose an arm or more likely his life. The Hob pulled the Kings head down toward him and whispered something in his ear. It was a long whisper and the King's face was a kaleidoscope of reactions.

Warthog had not heard what the Hob had said to the King but whatever he said made the King's demeanor change so dramatically that every Goblin in the room became solemn and purposeful.

"Goblins!" The King stood and tore the blood coat from his shoulders, held it in front of him and dropped it into the fire. The message was clear. Rule making was done. Burn the helmets and coats. Goblins were going to war.

Many years later and days after the Kings death Warthog happened upon the three horned Hob. "What did you say to him?" Warthog asked bluntly without introduction or pretext.

"To get him off his royal rump you mean?" The Hob toyed with a bauble hanging from his neck and blew into it. A sick duck call sounded from it. Warthog winced.

"Yes," Warthog stepped in front of the Hob.

"I told him the truth. I told him that glorious stories and exultations of Goblin glory would not feed the horde. I told him, in so many words, that his words were making the goblins hungry but his words would soon run out and when they did the Horde would look to see if they could find more."

Warthog's blank stare indicated to the Hob that the intimidating Goblin had not understood. "I told him," the Hob said exasperated by his having to further explain, "that the Horde would eat him when he ran out pretty words!"

They became traveling companions not long after and remained good friends. Warthog, not being fond of keeping baubles, had provided the Hob with as many baubles as he could carry. Warthog had made the Hob trinket rich. And now the Warthog needed answers to this goat king puzzle.

He smiled to himself remembering that first meeting. The Hob's camp was full of Goblins that Warthog would never associate himself with. Some were scrawny twigs of things and others share deformities like the Hob's own. He supposed that this is why the Hob surrounded himself with them. They must have been a comfort to him. He spotted his destination. The Hob's tent was, like the Hob, unusual. It was best described as flotsam and jetsam tied together with animal hides and large baubles all bragging the hobs wealth. Two weasel like Goblins stood outside of the entrance.

"Out with you, you old miser!" Warthog screamed at the tent scaring the weasel guards. They dropped the points of their spears and aimed at his chest. "Don't be ridiculous," Warthog snarled at them.

"Too many green fires for you my friend?" A voice beamed out from the tent.

"Come out," he demanded.

"I'm indisposed at the moment." It meant, Warthog knew, that his fickle friend was taking his ritual spiced bath. "Either come in or we have a loud conversation through thin walls." Which meant Warthog would have to hunch himself into the tent and walk with cramps for days after. The weasel brothers, for that is was he decided to call the Goblin guards, quickly moved out of his way. He grunted his way into the opening. Not long after his entering, the familiar cackling laugh of the three horned Hob was heard throughout the camp.

"A goat! Ha hah ha ha ha ha aaaah hah, a goat! Really?" The weasel brothers turned their questioning faces to the tent.

"What is so funny?"

"So, what we have here in our midst are two Goblin Kings." More laughter and this time it was twice as loud. Warthog could never stop himself laughing with his friend even if he had no idea what it was that he was laughing about. The cackling tenor and the cavernous bass of their laughter was legendary. Lon and Chaney is what the Goblins started to call them though no one knows quite why. The Hob preferred Laurel and Hardy but once Goblins got something stuck in their head there was no getting it unstuck!

"Really, my friend, why do you laugh? This is cause for great concern!"

Through the walls of the tent, “No great concern! Just an interesting one! Really, my old friend, really interesting!”

“And I suppose I’ll have to wait to find out why you think it’s so interesting. You could save me a cramped back and a long walk back if you just told me now.”

Inside the dim tent three horns and two feet stuck out above a tin bathtub. Warthog hunched his head over a plate of cooked beetle larvae and poked, nibbling on their soft boiled cinnamon skeletons.

“No need to worry. This should be a fun time to be a Goblin. Or it could be the worst. Depends on who’s left to ask after it all,” the bathtub echoed.

“So,” Warthog shifted himself further into the ‘still not comfortable’ position, “you’re going to make me wait.”

“Oh no, good friend,” said the bathtub, “as far as I know, and from what my birds and bones tell me, from your surprise Goblin goat king news, we have nothing to worry about.”

Warthog gave the tub a suspicious eye.

“After all, it seems like our kings, real or not, are just a couple of kids!” The Hob laughed himself beneath the water.

## Chapter 9

# MY PONY, MY SLINGSHOT AND ME

The black leaves exploded from the tree! An ethereal vortex spiraled them into the sky and the leaves turned toward Bareback Jack and his mount. He watched in fascinated horror as the leaves became crows again. He shook off the trifled fascination gripping his brain and grabbed onto Avalanches reins. Nothing to do but run now, even though he knew his and Avalanches chances were about zilch! Avalanche rippled and bucked wanting direction from his rider. Jack looked around at the empty plain that had promised a faster path and cursed. Nowhere to run. Avalanche bucked again!

“Hold on,” he calmed himself and let his senses fill him. He could feel the fury of the crows spiraling and whipping the sky ahead of him. The whip grass, blue-green and razor sharp to his left, not that way, the cottonwoods and their thick layer of saplings and vines would make good cover but too far, behind him the fence and the river too far! Ahead of him the dead tree. It’s massive branches, most short, eroded by wind and time seem to call to him. The tree had been the crows perch and a doomsday sign post if he had ever seen one. But Bareback Jack trusted his mind to his senses. He called it his gut sense. What it really was, and even knowing what it was he still like to call it ‘trusting his gut’ was letting his thoughts pour out of his mind: the fear, the crows, the message, the Goblin King, his loved ones, his trusted pony, everything had to clear out so he could see and feel clearly.

He was really good at it. Where most folks would feel trapped, confused, frightened or plain done for, Bareback Jack let his mind fill up with the music of the world and when it did he could dance to it like no other! The first time he felt it was when he was just a kid. They had been swimming in the Blue Dragon’s Lake when all of them knew it was close to hatching time and not the smartest time to be enjoying a spring swim. But winter had been long and the first days of spring were still tainted with the cool morning frosts of winters good-byes. So they made the excuses that excited Tickle and people everywhere make for themselves when fun takes precedence to danger. But not young Jack; he knew the danger was there and there was really no ‘safe’ time to be swimming in this particular dragon lake. What he didn’t know was what made it so easy for him to ignore the danger even though it presented itself more clearly than it did to his friends. Not that it didn’t scare him, it did, but he felt something would see him through no matter what happened. What he came to learn later in his life is that when he felt the cool, calm waves absorbing him danger was always right around the corner.

When Blue dragons nest their eggs they do so beneath the water and deep into the sand below. Eggs from the blue Dragons are unique among egg laying dragons. The eggs *grow* and absorb oxygen from the water to keep the small resident in the egg alive. It is not uncommon for a baby blue dragon egg to be twenty times the size of the dragon itself. In the case of blue dragons the egg and the dragon inside are linked with one another. When it



comes time for the young to leave the safety of the egg where it's been incubating for over a years time the egg and the dragon begins their long farewells. The fairies say that the mother and father dragon put stories into the egg so that the egg can tell the young dragon forming inside all the things they need to know before they leave the egg. No one's ever asked an egg though. What happens first is the eggs thick shell and its honeycombed interior begin to thin and weaken. The dragon helps this along by slowly eating the honeycomb inside of the egg, its very first meal. When enough of the egg has been eaten away and its shell is no longer strong enough to keep the weight of the water from crushing it the egg blooms. It blooms like a flower facing the wrong way and the mass of escaping air catches the neck sacs full of air beneath the dragons jaw and speeds the dragons to the surface like rockets. When a clutch hatches beneath the lake the lake seems to boil and explode. Blue dragons are very prolific egg layers. There is hardly ever a clutch of eggs that number less than twenty and the eggs always hatch at the same time. When twenty baby blue dragons leave their eggs the amount of energy released beneath the water is amazing. The frightening part is the void left by the collapsed eggs. The air escaping from the eggs pushes the dragons to the surface so fast that the dragons can spread their wings and take flight meters above the surface of the water and avoid being dragged back below by the void. It was a beautiful sight. Unless, of course, you were swimming above a hatching clutch of blue dragons. The Dragon's Cauldrons is what the water is called after the beautiful eruption of baby dragons takes to the sky. The void left in the water filling itself up again? It's called the . The swift pull of the water would take anything from the surface and pull it directly to the bottom of the lake as fast as you never want to go.

That is exactly where Little G, as his friends called him back then, and his friends found themselves. The first clutch hatched far from the shore toward the middle of the Lake and far enough away from their little swimming party as to cause them no immediate danger. But they all knew when one clutch hatched others were sure to follow. Four of his friends made breakneck speed toward the shore. Once there they cheered the others to swim faster hooting and laughing between their calls to swim faster not quite yet aware of the peril their friends were about to face. He hung back, calmly telling the others not to swim fast but just to keep swimming to shore even when the first tiny bubbles tickled up his belly and around his neck. Clearly he was not the only one to feel them. "Do you feel it too?" Their eyes asked looking back at him, Little Gertrudemous, ignored their terror, told them to keep swimming. Then the tiny bubbles became a sizzling foam.

The first big ones made a heavy drum sound as they reached and broke the surface. Little G heard his friends screams and ignored them, yelling now to them to swim harder. Then, out in front of him, a fury of white spray and foam launched Pits into the sky. It was the first of the clutch below them. The baby Blue came up directly beneath, Pits caught him in the belly and launched them both into the sky. The baby dragon was not at all too happy about having his introduction to the heavens interrupted by a rather fat Tickle and Pits was tossed off, luckily in the general direction of the lakes shore and far enough into the shallows the he would be able to drag himself to the safety of the rocks and sand. The moment that Pits and the dragon rocketed clumsily up into the air in a foamy explosion of dragon shrieks and tickle screams, Little G's world slowed down. It slowed down a lot. He could see the neck sacs of the little blue dragon shining pearlescent through the sunshine and the glittering droplets dancing away from the tiny scales, little rainbows flashing so fast he doubted his

eyes. He could see the terror wide eyes of Pits as the air was knocked from his lungs and the dragon whipping its neck to set Pits sailing against the blue sky. The bubbles coming up from directly beneath him, too were slowed into gelatinous pockets full of wonder.

He didn't know what it was, the voice, the hand, the thing pulling his attention into the dark water beneath him. He couldn't resist the feeling in his body to swim down. So he didn't. He took as deep a breath as his lungs would allow and dove. The bubbles became thicker and thicker and the water darker. He was oblivious to what surface meant and what air meant and, even if he could have heard them, the cries of his friends to come up and save himself. The water became his world. The discs of air rapidly making their way to the surface became the music of the lake, its voice and its power. He felt the water and the pockets of rising air moving all around him. So many in moments that he was hard pressed to see beyond them. But he needed to. He needed to see, to glimpse the blue shiny head of what he knew was coming up like a rocket beneath him. And there it was. The head of the blue dragon, first a tiny speck of diamond blue, then a teardrop, and then he pushed back against the water pushing himself back just enough to see the head go past and to reach out his hand in just the right moment, the right notes of the music, to grab hold of the dragons tail!

It's how, he realized, his legend got its first taste of air, of words. The trio into the air was brief and not as magical as diving toward the depths of the lake, through the rising air making its way to the surface. As soon as the dragon realized she had a hitchhiker she did an unexplainable loop into the air and tossed Little G higher into the sky than he thought possible. He was unlucky that day. He didn't finish letting the music take him through all the way to the end. If he had, he would have let go of the dragons tail as soon as they broke the surface of the water and he would have ended up somewhere in the general vicinity of his friend Pits. Instead, he watched Pits' neck arc and Pits' wide eyes flow as he sailed high above him. Over the shoreline and Pits fell backward into the sand. Over the sand and Little G closed his eyes as he knew what was coming. Into the hard rocks above the sand he landed with as much grace as a potato meeting a mallet.

It took him two months to heal all the broken bones in his body. But his bones did heal. His friends and family never could understand how he kept a smile on his face the entire time he was laid up in bed. They didn't understand because they hadn't heard the music beneath the lake. They had never heard the universe make seconds of chaos into a symphony of stilled heartbeats, glimpses of art in the world so profound that it made him well up with tears and laugh so long that it made everyone worry about his mind.

Every Tickle told him he was one lucky Tickle. Every Tickle in the lake that day was one lucky Tickle they all said. But only he knew who was the luckiest Tickle of them all. He knew he was. He knew that something entirely special, something entirely his own and one thing that he would have for the rest of his life was born into him that day on the lake. He would always call it the day he got his guts, although, he knew it was much more than that.

*make for the tree*

His gut told him. He signaled Avalanche and loosed the reigns on the huge caterpillar. At first Avalanche did not move.

“That’s right,” Bareback yelled, “to the tree!” Avalanche, knowing his rider would never steer him wrong, moved with all the speed he could muster toward the tree, toward the crows. This confused the crows. The lead crow lost its deadly momentum as he saw his prey, not running, but moving toward him! The Crow dropped down and the crows behind him followed lighting over the tips of the tall grass.

Bareback reached and gave a tug on a long spine from Avalanches back. He pulled it free and laid it over his knees. He took his slingshot and loosened its band, pulled his two spare bands out and tied them together with the first. One end he tied to the tip of the spine the other to its bottom. He quickly reached and pulled a smaller spine from Avalanche! He raised his makeshift bow and knocked the spine into the band. He pulled the band back and waited until the lead crow came up above the grass.

*not yet*

The crows spun like a cyclonic arrowhead toward Bareback! Avalanche, his brave steed, did not waver. Not to his surprise, Avalanche pushed harder toward the tree. His legs thundered beneath Bareback and he smiled.

The lead crow could see the massive caterpillar getting closer. He let his claws hang below his chest. The other crows followed suit. They would cut the caterpillar and its rider to ribbons. No one would get through to the Fairies. No one would sound the alarm. No army would be raised. Nothing would stop the march of the Goblins. But the crow didn’t care, not really. War would bring food to his flock no matter where or how it happened. Something else was telling him to stop the message, something so sinister the crow hardly knew why he was trying to keep anything from getting to the Fairies. But he would do what the thing in his mind was telling him to do. He would rip the caterpillar to shreds and...

*now*

Bareback loosed the spine from his hand. The band thrummed like a guitar string in the universes’ orchestra as the spine came away from it and sailed into the air. The crow saw a strange dot appear in front of him. The dot wobbled and got longer, then turned into a dot again and then the dot went straight through him and into the bird behind him. The Crows burst into the air as if they had hit an invisible wall. They saw their leader fall and the one behind him. They were trying to understand what just happened. It wouldn’t take them long to recover. Bareback let another spine fly into the cloud of crows.

The tree was closer now. Now he saw what his gut saw. Something had been using the tree as a burrow, a rather large something judging by the size of the hole. It was good news. The crows wouldn’t follow him below ground; against their nature! But the burrow was still far and the crows were recovering. He pulled another spine free and twisted around to see the crows forming up behind him. Bareback had seen birds do some funny things before but he had never seen anything like how these crows were acting. They were moving like something in the world was duding them all at once. In a way, he thought, it was strangely, hypnotically beautiful – Avalanche whinnied and Bareback shook his head. Now *that* was weird! Was he almost hypnotized by a flock of crows? He believed he almost was! He let the third spine fly directly into the frontmost crow. He hit his target and again they broke apart and flew up into the sky to gather themselves again. They were recovering faster this time. He plucked another spine. Avalanche whined.

“Don’t worry,” Bareback leaned toward Avalanche’s head, “I won’t pull ‘em all out!”

He thought for a moment as Avalanche’s legs pounded the earth, “What?” He waved the spine out in front of him, “Did you have other plans for these?”

The crows were coming down again! He loosed again and the spine hit the lead crow again! Another crow dropped into the front of the vortex. They weren’t scaring now.

“We’re in trouble, pal!” Bareback pulled two long spines from Avalanche. He turned and balanced himself on the saddle holding the two spines out like swords. Avalanche belched out a series of whines that was, even though it sounded more like belching frogs, a caterpillar laugh.

Bareback turned his head, his brow wrinkled not understanding, back toward the caterpillar’s head. “You got a better idea?” He screamed at the caterpillar!

The crows started to drop! Their claws out with malicious and deadly intent glinted in the sun. Bareback Jack said a tickle prayer to himself and gripped the spines tight in his fists, “Ok you feathered freaks! Let’s see what you got!”

Avalanche stopped! The world changed for Jack. He went flying through the air. He watched past the spines in his hands, Avalanche get smaller. He watched the crows coming down on Avalanche. They were nearly on top him. And then the caterpillar exploded.

Every long spine on Avalanche back, every short spine, every blue tipped spine, every and any spine that could come away from his body launched into the air. Crows fell from everywhere in the sky! Then Jack hit the ground and rolled. He got up and looked toward his steed. Avalanche had taken more than half of the crows army away. The laid in twisted feathers on the ground. The other crows flew up and away from the caterpillar but they did not keep flying away. They hovered and decided they were still many and enough to destroy the caterpillar and it’s rider.

*run*

Avalanche called out to him! “I’m not gonna run,” he yelled back at the caterpillar even though he knew he had too. He had been thrown over halfway to the tree and the burrow was in sight. He turned back again to see the crows falling toward Avalanche. He couldn’t watch. He turned and put everything he had into his legs. He ran faster than he ever had in his life. Avalanche whinnied one last cry. He dared not look back.

He came up to the burrow beneath the great gnarled roots of the old tree and threw himself down into it. He fell and rolled and fell and stopped. He didn’t move. He cried for his friend who sacrificed himself for his life. Above him the hole was being investigated by the crows. He could hear their shrieks and cawing questions. He could see their moving shadows changing the light down in the hole. They would not come into the burrow.

Then they did. Jack didn’t move. The crows had killed his caterpillar, his steed, his mighty pony. He moved. He stood up. His tears stopped.

Well, that wouldn’t be for nothing, he thought. He saw the eyes of the first crow as it ducked its head into the narrow space. It’s beak open and searching.

He stepped back further into the burrow. The music of the universe had stopped. His gut told him nothing. At least that's what he had thought. Then his gut had a voice all its own, outside of himself. In fact, the voice sounded a lot like it was behind him.

He turned back and looked into the darkness behind him. Several glinting blue eyes blinked in the dark.

"Tickles should know better," the glinting blue eyes said.

In a heartbeat Bareback Jack knew exactly where he was, what he was standing in front of and just how completely doomed he was. Oh well, he thought, he had tried.

"And crows," the voice from below the blue eyes continued, "don't even belong on the branches of my tree." The crow, seemingly oblivious to where he was and what was talking to him, took another step forward. Bareback was knocked to the side of the hole by a big blue scaled hand. A long nose passed in from of his face and the six eyes of a Darlinger Dragon glanced at him briefly. The dragon took a deep breath. The crow cawed a question. The dragon let out his breath and the crow disappeared in a smokey blue flame.

"Are there more?" The dragon asked the little Tickle.

"Some," he said quietly.

"Don't go anywhere," the dragon said and sped out of his burrow.

Bareback Jack sat back on his haunches and leaned his head against the cold earth. He remembered a song an old Tickle used to sing to him when he was young. He couldn't remember all the words, but he tried singing it anyway.

"Me, my pony and my slingshot rode out one day, out into the sun, me my pony and my slingshot..." He couldn't sing. He could only cry and listen to the crows scream above him as they all turned into blue flames.

## CHAPTER 10

# VAST LANDSCAPES AND NARROW ESCAPES

The thing about slugs that's particularly gross is the slime. It's disgusting when it's wet. It smells like rotten fruit and it reminds Kisser Fairy of snot. Another bad thing about snail snot is when it dries it's harder than dried tree sap. She was covered in it. If she left the moist inside of the snail shell, which she so desperately wanted to do, she would be a snot statue in minutes. So adding to her already impossible chances of escape, she had to try to and find a way to rinse off while escaping!

If only she hadn't tried to cut through the horde! She cursed herself for not being more careful. Of course if she had been a careful kind of fairy she never would have come in the first place, the fairy wouldn't know the Goblins were rising until it was too late and their world would be forever plunged into a grim darkness that she hardly cared to think about! Oh but now she had gotten herself into something worse. "No," she said to herself, "I have only gotten into something *else!* I can get myself out of here. She pressed her ear against the inside of the snail's shell and listened. She could hardly hear a thing. The snail's shell was too thick. Even though she couldn't hear anything through it she could still tell it was day. It's slight translucence let her see vague shadows moving around the snail. She was glad she picked a smaller snail. She doubted that she would have been able to see anything at all if she had snuck into one of the big ones.

She considered moving down closer to the opening. "Don't be hasty now," she said quietly to herself, "Just let the thing come to you." She knew if she just waited she would find a way out. But waiting was never her strong suit. Waiting in snail snot was really not her strong suit. Maybe just a peek she thought and just when she started to move so did the snail.

It wasn't fast. Snails aren't very fast anyway until the Goblins feed them the Wursterspeltz. Then they're as fast as the caterpillars the Tickles ride. Now, if she had some Wursterspeltz that would take the slime off of her! Of course, she would smell so bad that there would be no way to hide anywhere. As far as hiding, she needed to find a hiding place that wasn't moving in the wrong direction! She needed to get to the other Fairies! She needed to get to the Queen! She did not need to go back toward the Obekey. She had to move. She had to at least see if there was a way for her to get this snot off of her. If she stayed in the moist confines of the snails shell the snot wouldn't dry but she wouldn't be getting closer to home either! And, as soon as she stepped out, it would begin to harden. And, she thought to herself, there's no flying covered in this. The frustration was building up in her fast. She knew she was about to do something rash. She also knew if she acted without

thinking she would likely find herself in a much more precarious situation than the one she was in now. How could it get any more precarious, she thought as she crawled slid down the snails back. The opening between the snails shell and the snails neck was an undulating gauntlet. As it moved the space between shell and neck opened wide slowly. It closed up much faster. If she was caught between the neck and the shell every little bone in her body would be crushed to bone-dust!

She could try a little mental magic on the snail! Then what? Then she would be found out and tossed into a Goblin necklace and kept until her life ran out. Or they'd just eat her. Neither one sounded too good to her.