



Prologue

No Great Concern

Yusef 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 with higher penalties. Just thinking of the penalties 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 (who couldn't hold it and peed on the carpet *again*), and 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) when Yusef *did* remember to put away the empty box of cereal. 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 had 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.

Around 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...

The 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.

They 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 had begun.