



# MIRROR, MIRROR, TAKE A FALL

A Comic Goblin Tale of the Never Realm

Everyone has a creation myth. There are thousands of them. One for each race and another for each god. Some claim the number of stars in the sky represents all the creation myths in the universe. This story of one of them. The star in the lower left. No, not the bright one. The tiny flickering one below it. The one which looks like it's about to go out any second.

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**T**he Great Goblin Tower rose four stories in the air. Well, it wasn't a tower in the true sense of the word. It was more like four wooden platforms stacked on top of each other, held up by an uncoordinated stack of stilts. It had the appearance of something likely to fall over in a big wind. But it was the center of Goblin Magic. And it was right smack in the middle of a war for control of the universe. A war that could very well spell the end of goblin society. Unless somebody did something.

At its base stood a long mud-brick hut with a thatched roof. This was the main hall. A combination classroom and conference center. If you were to ask any human architect about the structure, he'd condemn it at once. But humans aren't goblins.

Pounder raised his voice louder than the general din in the hall. "Why does it have to involve us? It's never involved us before." The inexperienced Warcaster clicked his extraordinarily long fingernails together, demanding an answer in the most threatening manner he could muster. His head bobbed, displaying a large collection of gold earrings hanging from his long lobes.

"It has always involved us," Forge replied in a dismissive tone, "We only think so because we didn't want to have anything to do with it. Which creates the *illusion* it didn't involve us. But in the end, reality is real, not our perception of it."

The room broke into a roar of disagreement. One goblin screaming at another. Other goblins yelling back even louder. It was your average day. In some ways, it was quiet. For once Sledge decided to stay out of it. Goon pulled on the long sleeves of his robe. "Does this make sense to you?"

Sledge chuckled. "Make sense, no. But I am aware of the story."

Goon bowed. "Could I ask you to enlighten me?"

Normally, Sledge would shoo such a miscreant away. But this was a crisis. And nobody really knew what to do in a crisis, so Sledge decided to answer her question. "Before the dawn of time, there was nothing but the gods and their servants, the angels. I sure you can guess the outcome."

A small band of goblins began to gather around Sledge. He suspected it was because he was carrying a book, which made everyone believe he could read. A small runt with wiry green hair peered up at him. "No one wanted to do any work?"

"No," Sledge grinned, "Goblins have always done their fair share of work. No, there was an argument. And before long a rebellion broke out."

"Now we're talking," someone shouted out.

Sledge ignored the interruption. "There were dark angels and light angels. The dark angels wanted to overthrow the gods and rule in their place. The light angels stood by the gods' side and remained loyal."

Goon nodded her head. "So, there was a war?"

"A war beyond all wars."

"What side were the goblins on?"

Sledge cringed. He found explaining these things tedious. "We didn't take a side. We didn't want to be involved."

"What happened?"

"The dark angels slaughtered all the gods except for one. Then he cast them out of heaven."

There was a murmur among the crowd gathered to listen. "But one of the goblins, Zekki the Deceiver," the crowd hushed at the mention of Zekki's name, "he stabbed the last god in the back when no one was looking."

"Did we get thrown out too?"

"You'd think, but no. The gods were all gone. Zekki decided the light angels would be pissed, so he convinced the other goblins to leave on their own. Carrying the dead god along with them."

"What happened to the god's body?"

Sledge grinned, showing a full, double line of sharpened teeth. "You're standing on him."

The door to the hut flew open. Everyone could tell the Mighty Ruler, Master of Tunnels and Supreme Ruler of the Hidden Worlds, High Lord Melvin was about to walk into the confluence of warcasting wizards. His presence was felt not because he was so tall; in fact, he was a bit on the short side. No, it was because he was always flanked by two huge earth elementals everyone called Fricke and Fracke. These hulking masses of earth and stone had a difficult time forcing their way through the low, goblin designed door, but they managed. They had to duck and crouch to fit into the building. If they'd stood up, the two would have taken the building's roof off. They didn't look uncomfortable... but then again, how would anyone know if an earth elemental was uncomfortable. They have no skill at facial expression. They stared at everyone with their brilliant gem-like eyes. These viewing orbs glowed disturbingly with a spectral, inner light. The crowd dissipated in their presence and the High Lord Melvin could now be seen.

The High Lord Melvin was little more of your standard goblin, as opposed to something extraordinary. Perhaps with a slightly bigger head than most. His most distinctive feature was a large scar under his right eye. He wore it like a badge of honor from the battle of Camhordia. He shook his meager body and assumed his full height. He turned to address the assembled crowd. His voice had a booming, echoing quality to it. "You, you, you and you." The high lord pointed to Sledge, Pounder, Forge, and Goon. "I hereby define and declare you my personal warband. I hereby commission you will all the rights and responsibilities this entails."

The High Chancellor of the Magic Concord, Roouthless, stepped forward. He was one of the most revered goblins alive, being over thirteen. "This is all very well and good, High Lord. In fact, I applaud your choice of Sledge, he's one of my most gifted students. However, Goon and Pounder are merely first quarter students. And Forge here is little more than a failed adventurer. Surely you don't intend to give them the most important court positions in all of goblinkind?"

The High Lord Melvin narrowed his beady little eyes. "If I had wanted your opinion, I have ripped out your entrails and read the prophecy painted in the spots covering your liver. You know, while you watched... screaming."

Roouthless took a step back.

His royal greatness was not in a good mood. And not just because he wasn't smiling, He did that only when he was slaughtering his enemies. "Humans, elves, and their dragon-undercarriage smelling angel allies have stolen the great dagger of Zekki the Deceiver, our holiest of artifacts."

A gasp and a murmur when through the crowd. Everyone looked back at their ruler with disbelief. Okay, maybe not so much disbelief as astonishment. Plus, you didn't look away when the High Lord Melvin is talking to you. Not if you want to keep your gizzard in one piece. "I want it returned," the High Lord Melvin continued in his commanding tone. "You four are going to get it for me. Before the demons and the orcs get their hands on it."

Roouthless gazed back at his ruler with fearless eyes. "Then why send only four? The strength of goblins clans' rests in our numbers." He stood before the high lord bravely. Roouthless wasn't exactly as fearless as he looked. He was simply tired and being thirteen, he'd be well remembered even if the High Lord Melvin decided to kill him.

But the High Lord Melvin merely snorted. "And if we send an entire horde everyone will notice. Not a brilliant plan, duck face." Then Melvin almost smiled. But he suppressed it the moment it made even the slightest appearance. Snuffing the life from it as if crushing a bug beneath his feet. "Besides I don't really give a dragon crap if we recover the hag-cursed thing or not. Still, I'm required to make an effort. It's in the bylaws."

There was a rumble of disapproval.

"Shut up you morons," the High Lord Melvin demanded. "If you want the stupid thing back, then make sure these four find it and bring it back. Witless wizards. It's not like it's made of gold or anything."

Roouthless crossed his arms. "No, it made of platinum."

"So?"

"Platinum is worth more than gold."

The High Lord Melvin thought about this for a second. His eyes darted back and forth as he pondered. "Well, then, if it's worth something, you'd better go and get it, then haven't you?" No one ever claimed the High Lord Melvin couldn't change his mind. His whimsical nature was part of his charm. No to mention providing large amounts of work for the Undertaker's Guild.

"So," Roouthless announced, "we agree this is a mission of critical importance to all of goblinkind. It's our clan's duty to protect the holy blade. Who else will join the High Lord Melvin's personal warband as guards? Who else will become heroes?"

The hall went silent. Goblins to the left and right gazed down at the floor. A few shuffled their feet as if examining their footwear. Or perhaps cleaning something off the bottom. A few stared down at their feet even if they weren't wearing shoes.

Roouthless sounded disgusted. "Cowards."

"What did you expect," the High Lord Melvin said with a swagger, "they are goblins after all."

The High Chancellor of the Magic Concord simply grunted.

The decision made; the hut started to clear out. The High Lord Melvin and his two loyal earth elemental emissaries went first, followed by the mass of the goblin assembly of spell casters. Only Roothless and Melvin's four chosen victims remained. "Melvin has no respect for magic," Roothless complained.

"He's a warrior. Like all killers he expects all problems to be solved at the point of a sword or under the blade of an axe. Therefore, he's picked, you four idiots. He expects a horrific, apocalyptic failure."

Pounder grumbled. "This gives us an incentive to find the thing and stick it in his back when we return."

"Can the bravado, you cretin. You don't stand a chance in the nine hells. The four of you couldn't even survive in a subsidiary sub-substation of the underworld." Roothless walked over to the far corner of the hut. "So, I'm giving you this."

Leaning against the wall was a smooth container. At first glance, it looked like it was lacquered wood, but the corners were all rounded, strange trenches crisscrossed the surface, and there were odd clasps on the sides. Glued to the surface was a small piece of paper with some writing on it. "What does it say?" Goon asked.

"What do you care," Roothless shot back, "you can't read anyway."

"Just asking."

"Well don't"

The High Chancellor of the Magic Concord fingered the box lovingly. "This is a loan. I want it back. It's a human weapon. The most powerful piece of magic anyone has ever seen. Don't open it. Don't use it unless you are in dire straits. Outnumbered and soon to die. Even then, I want you to think twice. Understand me?"

The four nodded their heads.

Pounder found a coil of rope on the nearby storage shelves and started wrapping the rope around the box. Student of magic or not, he seemed pretty good at weaving. By the time he'd added two loops on one side of the box, it appeared as if the box was cradled in a half-net, half-backpack contraption which would have made an industrious gnome jealous. "Help me put this on."

Goon and Forge each grabbed a side and lifted. Pounder put his small arms through the loops, and he was now carrying the strange box on his back. It looked heavy, but if there is one thing goblins are used to it was a hardship. Pounder hiked the weight upon his shoulders. "Okay, let's get going. We have miles to go and my feet are going to be sore as hell by the time we get there."

The group marched through the door and out into the shadows of the Great Goblin Tower. Everyone looked at Sledge. "Now what?" Goon enquired rather pathetically.

Pounder let out a dry laugh. He raised one arm high into the air as if in a proclamation. "To the nearest tavern."

Forge clicked his tongue. "You just want to get drunk."

“No, if I’d just stolen something of this kind of value. I’d be looking for a buyer. Or if I’d I completed the transaction; I’d be bragging about it... in a tavern.”

Sledge raised himself up into a commanding gesture. “It’s settled then. Off to the nearest tavern.” The little, rag-tag group started marching off down a trail in the woods, Sledge in the lead. Roothless watched them go. With a gloomy look in his eyes, he muttered to himself. “They’ll never make it.”

The four proceeded down the track with a jaunty step, almost whistling. The woods smelled of oleander and pine needles. Nasty, biting insects buzzed around their heads. This didn’t please anyone except for Goon. She cleared her throat. “Why do you think the High Lord Melvin picked us?” A casual observer would have noticed she was casting about for praise.

Pounder didn’t waste any time with pleasantries. “Because we’re idiots.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re idiots, yes. Walking dead. That’s what I mean. He’s sure we’ll fail. He assumes we’ll all get ourselves horribly killed. At least, this way, he can claim to the others he made an effort to get the relic back into the clan’s hands.”

Sledge frowned. “A depressing thought.”

Pounder gave him a sarcastic laugh. “You know these warrior types. They don’t trust anyone who can create things out of thin air. That’s what magic does. It creates things. The one thing all warriors are afraid of is people who can create something. Something from nothing.”

Goon shook her head. “So, you’re saying...”

“We’re expendable.”

She looked dejected but turned to Pounder. “So, what is it *your* so good at creating?”

Pounder held out his hands and extended his fingers into the air. The claw-like nails at the ends of his digits had to be at least as long as the fingers themselves. He clicked them together as if he was rubbing a piece of flint against a hunk of steel. The ends of his fingernails erupted into jets of flame which burned as if powered by jets of air.

“Okay, you get to start all the campfires on the trip.”

Pounder shook his hands as if drying them and the flames extinguished. “Har, har, har. What brilliant skill have you mastered?”

“I control insects.”

“Now, there’s a real useful skill. Although I bet no one ever invites you to the family picnic.”

Goon lifted one sleeve of her long robe. Inside the garment was a writhing mass of insects, centipedes, millipedes, carrion beetles, and an assortment of other creepy crawlies too numerous to mention. Pounder thought he saw a Stirge or two in there. “Some of them carry a nasty bite,” she remarked with a proud air. She was practically holding her nose up.

“Yea, well,” Pounder remarked, “you can keep your mosquitos to yourself.”

Goon wasn't about to let a simple finger flame warcaster get her down in the dumps. “So, Forge, what do you do?”

Forge wore more earrings than your average pirate. They blossomed like flower petals under a huge, but dirty, turban which tended to force his ears out at an odd angle. “I can foretell the future.”

There was a round of snickering. In his left hand, he was clutching a black ball, the size of about four eggs. On its surface was a white painted circle, and in the middle of this circle, was a black number eight.

“So why did Roouthless say you were a failed adventurer?”

“My classmates and I decided to raid the tomb of Arvon the Wicked. When we got to the main door. I was called on to see the future, to ascertain what was on the other side.” Forge shook the ball he held in his hand to demonstrate. “All it said was ‘ask me again later,’ so we opened the door.”

“Then what happened.”

Pounder gave a wry laugh. “Everyone was killed.”

“It wasn't my fault,” the turban-wearing goblin protested with a whine.

Goon wouldn't let the subject drop. “If everyone was killed, how did you escape?”

Forge stopped dead in his tracks. “Simple.” Then as everyone was watching, he disappeared. The group froze in astonishment. A voice called out from the trail ahead of them. “Like this.” The group turned and there was Forge standing in the dirt path about ten yards ahead of them.

“You can teleport?” Pounder spat. “Why the hell are we walking to town if you can teleport us?”

Forge's reply was about as snotty as you might expect. “Because it only works for me, that's why.”

Pounder wasn't about to give up being snarky, but Goon interrupted him. “Sledge, what's your forte?”

“Yeah,” Forge took up the call, “What's in your precious book you are always carrying around? Is it filled with dangerous arcane spells?”

Sledge clutched the book tighter to his chest and tried to look imperious. “I press flowers in it. What's it to ya?”

“No seriously.”

Dropping the book to his side, Sledge reached into his robes with his free hand. He pulled out a deck of cards from an inside pocket. They were a beautiful set of hand-painted playing cards. Although the artwork was a little childish. It seemed more like a fourth grader's art project than a set of illustrations. Pounder slapped his knees. “You've got to be kidding.” He burst out in a deep belly laugh. “You do card tricks. You're nothing more than a party magician. Please don't tell me, with all your fancy airs, all you do is card tricks?”

Sledge clicked his tongue and then fanned and sorted the cards one-handed. If it was a child's birthday party, it would have been an impressive display of sleight of hand and card manipulation. Sledge took the top card and threw it at a tree. The card embedded itself deep into the tree's bark.

Pounder clutched his chest; he couldn't stop from laughing. "Right, that'll do some serious damage. You ought to be able to kill something in, what? Two or three days? Creatures everywhere will tremble."

"Wait a minute." Sledge reshuffled the deck and let fly with another card. It too stuck into the tree's bark. But then, less than a moment later, a crack echoed through the trees. The tree with the cards in it shook and then toppled over as if felled by the single blow of an axe.

Everyone stopped laughing. "Okay," Pounder admitted, "that's a thing."

Even Goon was impressed. "What else have you got in your robe?"

Sledge let out a proud smile displaying every one of his razor-sharp teeth. "I have a map."

"Can we use it to tell us where we are going?"

He removed the map from inside the folds of his robes. It was a large sheet of rolled-up parchment. You could smell the ink. The smell of ink on paper is always intoxicating. Sledge unrolled it and laid it out on the ground. He placed a rock at each of the corners, holding the map out more or less flat. Sledge indicated a place on the map with his index finger. Everyone leaned over to examine it closely. Sledge's finger held steady, pointing at the same section of the map. "We need to go here."

If anyone of them could have read the inscribed words, they'd have seen it quite clearly read, "Here, there be humans."



The path through the dark woods slithered snake-like through the trees. The goblin clans tended to live in out the way places. Hidden from the eyes of almost everyone. They didn't want to be found. Goblins know the value of laying low... if you'll forgive the pun. *Hard to get to* was their favorite address. Well, right after *secret lair*. Your average goblin wasn't much for socializing with other races. They could be, on a good day, quite unfriendly. As a result, if you were a goblin, getting anywhere else in civilization was a long and arduous trek.

Everyone froze. An arrow whizzed by the group's head.

In the next moments, there was a rush to find cover. Behind a tree, jumping into the undergrowth, or even under the occasional rock. Forge was the first one to poke his head up. "Are we under attack?"

Sledge shook his head. "I don't think so." He extended one finger, pointing off in the distance. On the ground lay a handsome buck with an arrow protruding from its chest. The arrow was still quivering. The deer was at least a twelve-pointer. Everyone started looking around for the hunter, but the bowman was smart and well concealed. Not to mention the fact goblin eyes have a hard time seeing clearly in daylight. They worked better in the dark.

"It better not be an elf."

“Pointed eared freaks,” Pounder hissed. “They always think they are better than everyone else. They’d shoot an arrow at their own grandmother. Cheeky bastards.”

“Spread out. Let’s find who it is.”

The goblins rapidly dispersed and started searching in the direction the arrow came from. Initially, their investigation was unfruitful. On top of everything, goblins don’t have much of a sense of direction. It goes along with the poor daytime eyesight. But the universe has a soft spot for small children and fools. All four of the goblins ended up standing over the body of the dead deer. Sure, it was the wrong direction, but it was still fortuitous. The four of goblins, the deer, and the hunter now stood in the same place. The hunter turned out to be a small, poorly dressed boy, perhaps ten or eleven. The boy and the goblins gawked at each other for a moment. No one knew how to break the silence. As it ended up, the boy spoke first. “Are you fairies?”

Pounder surged forward. “I’m gonna kill him,” he cried. Sledge held out his hand. The robed goblin caught Pounder in the chest as he tried to run past. Pounder slipped on his feet and went flying, eventually landing on his butt. The boy snickered.

Sledge adjusted the book across his chest. “No, my good sir. As you can see, we are goblin... goblin...”

“Travelers,” Goon added.

“Yes. That’s it. We are lowly goblin travelers.”

“You don’t look like travelers.”

Sledge grinned. “No one ever does.”

“I’m a hunter,” the boy grinned with happy joy.

“Yes, we can see you are,” Pounder grumbled. “I think the bow and arrow give it away. It’s a good thing we’re short. You might have killed someone with one of those.” He pointed at the boy’s quiver of arrows.

The boy appeared distraught. “Sorry, I wasn’t aiming for you. I was aiming for the deer. My name is Jarron.”

“Well met, good hunter Jarron. I am the lowly goblin traveler Sledge, and these are my companions, Forge, Pounder, and Goon.”

Jarron tried to be polite, but at the mention of Goon’s name his boyish giggle broke into an outright laugh. He shook so hard the goblins feared he might fall. “Sorry, sorry,” he fought back against the waves of laughter, “Its...” In an instant, the laughter was gone. Almost as if it had never happened. Young humans are oddly like this, only the goblin ancestors know why. “Why do goblins have such silly names?”

Pounder rose to his feet. His wide, glaring eyes gave his thoughts away. He was ready to charge again, but Sledge held him back, holding him by the collar. “An excellent question, young master human. You see its part of goblin culture. Parents name their children after a profession or something they want their children to learn to do.”

Jarron appeared confused. "So, your parents wanted you to slide down hills in the snow?"

"Not actually, they wanted me to become a blacksmith. A sledge is a type of a hammer as well as a sled."

"I see," Jarron struggled to keep from another bout of laughter. "And Goon?"

Sledge grinned. "Yes, well, I can see why you might be confused by Goon's name. It's a respected name in our clan. It's sort of like *tough guy*, only it's shorter."

"It's sort of like *tough guy* in my village too. Only we're not supposed to call people such things. They don't like it."

"Well, you can call Goon by her name any time you choose. Right Goon?"

"Of course."

Jarron pointed a finger at Goon. There was a serious shocked look on his face. "You're a girl goblin?"

Sledge had to use his other hand to stop Goon. "Yes, young human, she is... as you say... a girl goblin."

"Neat." The boy stepped over to the deer's body and retrieved his arrow. Pulling it out with a slurp, he wiped some of the blood on the leaves and then placed it back in his quiver. Then he grabbed the buck by the antlers and started dragging the deer's body along the ground. The effort seemed hopeless. It was way too big for him to manage effectively.

Sledge stepped in. "Let us help you with your burden." He waved the other goblins over and Forge and Goon soon had the carcass over their shoulders.

"What are you doing?" Pounder protested.

"Why we're helping his young lad take his prey back to his village. A human village." There was a slight pause. Pounder shrugged his shoulders. "One where we need to get into anyway. You know, without being noticed."

"Oh, right," Pounder replied. He hurried over and held up the middle of the deer to keep it from dragging on the ground. Pounder had quite a difficult time managing this as he was already carrying the special box on his back. The whole arrangement was taller than he was, so he had to keep shifting the weight to get a good grip. First, the box was over on the deer's left. The next minute it was over on the right.

It didn't take long for Jarron to notice Pounder struggling with his load. "What's in the box?" Jarron asked.

Without thinking, Goon replied. "We don't know."

"Why don't you open it and take a look?" Jarron headed right for the latches which held the container firmly closed.

Sledge ran interference. "No, no, no. We can't do open the box. What's inside is a secret."

Jarron's eyes gleamed. "A secret," he shouted. "Now we have to open it."

Rushing to stop him, Sledge interposed himself between the boy and the box. "Secret? Did I say secret? What I meant to say was, it's a surprise. Yes, that's it. What's in the box is a surprise. You wouldn't want to spoil the surprise, now would you?"

The young hunter gave more than a perfect impression of someone who was dejected. His voice dropped low. "No, I guess we wouldn't want to spoil a surprise."

The trip into town didn't take as long as Sledge thought it might. The entire group of goblins tried to hide under the deer as they entered the town. They got quite a few stares, but none of the humans did anything, not with Jarron leading them into the village. Most seemed glad the boy was getting some help, even if they looked strange.

"What are we doing?" Pounder demanded.

"We're trying to hide."

"How can we hide in the middle of the street?"

"Try and look like a mule," Sledge replied

Forge scoffed. "A green mule with eight legs."

"Yea, well," Sledge stammered, "nobody's perfect."

Before long they found themselves in front of the local tavern. At least it looked like a tavern. "Wait a minute, we're not going in there, are we?" Pounder asked.

"Of course, we are," Jarron explained, "My father owns the place. We're going to serve venison to the guests for supper tonight."

Sledge gave Pounder a glare. "How were you going to talk to the customers if you don't go inside?"

"I don't know. You're the start one. You figure it out."

"We're going inside," Sledge announced in a tone intended to deflect objections.

"Well, you can't go inside," Jarron corrected them. "Not just yet anyway. We must take the deer around back to the kitchen." The goblins would have shrugged their shoulders, but they there carrying a bit of dead weight. Jarron held open the kitchen door and the four goblins struggled to force the deer through the doorframe. It was a good thing it was dead.

A tall, burly man met them as they entered. "What's this?"

"I shot a deer, dad."

"I can see that. Who are your friends?"

"Dad this is Sledge, Forge, Pounder, and Goon." He turned to the goblins. "This is my father, Hott."

Goon couldn't help but laugh. "A tavern cook who calls himself Hott. That's a giggle. And you think goblins have silly names. Sounds like the pot calling the kettle burned."

"You mean black," Sledge corrected her. "As in burned until it seems all black with soot."

“Whatever.”

“Well now, welcome to the Grinning Mermaid Inn. Why don’t you boys go wash up? I’ll feed you dinner for helping my boy bring his deer back.”

“They’re goblins, dad.”

“Whatever you say, son.”

The goblins carried the carcass over to a table and unceremoniously dumped it onto the wooden surface. Jarron then scooted over to the water pump and started the handle moving. Once the water started pouring out, he rinsed his hands. Sledge and the others took the opportunity to sneak into the main room of the tavern through a side door.

The main room was a cozy place filled with the aromas of roasted meats and laughing voices. The walls looked like a deer hunter’s heaven. The room was so filled with antlers and other hunting trophies; it was clear the owners long ago had given up on any kind of decorative style and simply started putting up things wherever they could find room. Several small tables were crowded into the space. Each was being occupied by separate groups of people, all enjoying themselves, but they kept to themselves. They were so engrossed in their conversations, no one noticed the goblins as they entered.

This made it easy to listen in on conversations. The one nice thing about being short is you learn how to hide under tables. The trick is to avoid being kicked when people move their legs. Unfortunately, the overheard conversations generally centered around the prices of horses and sales of wheat. Not once did anyone mention weapons, or a goblin named Zekki. Although there was one fierce argument over who borrowed whose rake.

The team reassembled in a dark corner of the tavern. Pounder didn’t look happy, but then he usually didn’t. “This is a waste of time.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

As they tried to deal with their frustration, a human figure joined them. Only he didn’t walk through the door like everyone else, he walked through the wall. The spectral figure sat next to them on the floor. “Looking for something?”

Sledge wasn’t impressed with the ghost. “Who the devil are you?”

“A simple tavern patron like yourself.” It had obviously been haunting the tavern for a while. It was all bones and no flesh. The spirit leaned in closer. “I like to listen in on the village conversations as well and I enjoy never paying for service. The same as you.” He straightened up. “Although I must say, hiding under the tables is a nice angle. I only ever see drunken women do such things to avoid their husbands prying eyes.”

“Why don’t you go somewhere else to do your haunting. We’re busy.”

The spectre seemed taken aback. “Who? Them?” He pointed at the bar patrons. “They can’t see me. Humans are not very good at looking into the dark.”

“But goblins?”

“You’re practically experts.” The spirit let out a long yawn. Although why a ghost would be tired is beyond anyone’s guess. “So, you’re seeking Zekki’s knife, are you?”

In only a single sentence, the ghost got everyone’s immediate attention. At least everyone who could see him. Sledge adjusted himself. “Do you know what happened to it?”

“Have you seen it?” Goon added.

“Now, *that* is an interesting question.” The spirit settled back as if he was about to launch into a long story. “You never know with something like Zekki’s knife.”

“How’s that?” Goon enquired.

“Well because one can never really be sure what it looks like.”

Pounder snickered. “It’s generally a pointy thing with a metal blade and a handle.”

“For a normal blade, that might be true. But Zekki’s weapon was a sentient creature. It could take any form it chooses. It’s only called the knife because it was used to kill a god. Do you think a god wouldn’t know there was a blade in his presence about to be plunged into his back? The only way this would happen is if the god didn’t know it was a weapon. Look at yourselves.”

“Watch it bub,” Goon sneered.

“You are short little stumpy green things. Not a beautiful angelic thing anymore. This is what the universe does to you when you kill a god through treachery.”

Goon lunged forward, but Sledge held her back. “What are you going to do to him? He’s already dead.”

Forge changed the subject. “You know what really happens to you when you kill a god?”

“What?”

“You get his stuff.” The goblins all seemed utterly pleased with this response. They nodded their heads vigorously.

“So, you’re not looking for the knife then.”

“We are,” Sledge interrupted. “Do you know where it is? Although more to your point, can you tell us what it looks like?”

“As I indicated, it can look like anything it wants to look like. It has a mind of its own.”

Pounder narrowed his eyes. “How do *you* know so much about a goblin knife? Why should we believe such a crazy story in the first place?”

“Don’t believe me. Do I look like I care? It’s no skin off my nose.”

Sledge pointed at his face. “Your nose doesn’t have any skin.”

“There, you see.”

“So, where did you hear about this the knife?” Goon asked.

“Right here.”

“Do you know where it went?” Pounder’s eyes lit up like a lantern. “I’ll bet they sold it to the elves. Frogspawned pointed ear wackos. They take everything. Museums my ass, they’re just a better class of thief.”

“The elves don’t have it,” the ghost-related, “Humans do. In fact, it’s in the next town.”

All four of the goblins asked in unison, “Where?”

“Didn’t I say? I suppose I didn’t. How forgetful of me. You know, hanging around as a ghost can play havoc with one’s memory.” As I’m sure you are aware, human faces turn red when they get angry, but goblins turn a light shade of yellow when they get pissy. Right now, there were four goblins staring at a ghost with what appeared to be the most serious case of jaundice on record. The ghost simply stared at them. Then the obvious occurred to the apparition. “Oh, yeah. They’ve taken it to the Temple of the Holy Celestial.”

“Great,” Pounder growled, “that’s just peachy.”

Sledge slapped his companions on the shoulders. “Let’s get going. I want the knife of Zekki the Deceiver in our hands by nightfall. They bumped into one another in a race for the front door. After some amount of struggle, they found themselves on the street. That’s when the woman screamed and dragged her son off onto a nearby building. Several other people ducked into alleys.

“Maybe we should get off the street.” Goon suggested. The group ducked into an alleyway by the tavern. It was filled with empty ale casks. Forge knocked one over. “I have an idea.” He punched his fist right through the bottom of one of the casks and then yanked out the stopper cork.

“Great idea,” Pounder yelled.

Before long all four of the goblins were inside a wooden barrel, their feet sticking out the bottom. Pounder leaned forward and licked the wood. “Not bad, for human ale, but I’ve had better.” The four jostled for position, each trying to get enough elbow room inside the barrel to be comfortable. Sledge fought his way into a position where his eye was adjacent to the open hole where the cork had once been.

“What a minute,” Sledge stopped everyone. I can hear five people breathing in here.”

The boy raised his hand, “It’s me, Jarron.”

“What are you doing in here?”

“I’m coming along.”

“Not on the life of a dead rat,” Pounder announced.

“But the adventure.”

“Forget it.”

"I just want to help. You helped me, now it's my turn to help you," Jarron protested. "Besides who will show you how to get to the next town?"

"Okay," Sledge finally agreed, "but you better not slow us down."

The barrel slowly waddled down the main street. It teetered, leaning back and forth, constantly threatening to tip over. They made slow progress. Sledge could see the locals staring at it through the peephole. At least they weren't running down the street screaming. From time to time, they sat the barrel down and hid until the villagers went away. They almost got out of town when Forge tripped over someone else's feet. The barrel listed, tipped and then fell onto its side with a thud. Before they could manage to right it, the barrel started rolling.

It picked up speed, charging down the main street. Things went out of control when the road sloped downhill. They picked up speed and continued rolling. Until they unexpectedly ran into a tree. Not only did the barrel come to a sudden halt, but the pieces virtually exploded and wooden splinters rained everywhere. Sledge shook his head. "Well, at least we're out of town."

"That was fun." Jarron declared, "Can we do it again?"

"Maybe in the next town," Goon suggested, rubbing her head.



Pounder was still trying to pick the wood splinters out of his leather armor as they walked down the track between towns. "How are we going to get into a human town unnoticed this time?"

Goon nodded her head. "Especially without a deer carcass to hide behind."

"I left my bow back at the tavern," Jarron apologized, "or I'd shoot us another one."

"I don't think bringing along a dead animal will help us get into a temple anyway," Sledge surmised.

"How will we get into this temple anyway? Got any ideas?" Forge asked.

Goon swallowed hard. "Any way we can get into town without the locals getting all screamy and commencing with the hack, hack, stabby, stab?"

It was clear, Sledge didn't have an answer.

There was a snapping sound in the woods. Everyone could hear a stick-breaking underfoot. It was a good bet they were not alone in the forest. Forge could see a dark, furry shape in the distance. It was moving quickly. "That's a relief," Pounder wiped the sweat from his brow. "It looks like a pack of wolves. At least we won't have to walk all the way to the next town, we can ride." He displayed a rare grin.

The furry creature crashed through the underbrush. Then the creature stood, standing on its hind legs. "You know," Goon commented snidely, "for a wolf, this one looks an awful lot like a bear."

Heavy muscles moved behind the bear's brown, furry, and matted shoulders. They rippled with strength as his dripping claws took a swipe at Pounder. The goblin immediately lit his fingers. Towers of flames shot out from his fingertips. The bear took a step back, but soon overcame his fear of the fire. He took another slap at Pounder, roaring at the top of his lungs.

Forge teleported in, interposing himself between the bear and Pounder. The *Ursus arctos* let loose another scream and dove at Forge. A split second before the bear's giant paw connected, Forge teleported again. The result being the bear's paws swung through the open air and the creature's claws embedded themselves in a local tree. There was a scream from the bear which almost sounded human, as he ripped his claws out of the tree. He shook his paws trying to remove the bark remains from his claws.

This gave Goon a chance to step up. Lifting a sleeve, she released an entire squadron of scorpions out for the inside of her robe. The scurried straight for the bear, running up the animal's hind legs. There was a frenzy of the scorpions stinging and a loud chorus of the bear shrieking. With several great sweeps of its paws, he sent the stinging insects flying. The bear continued its advance. Unfortunately for the goblins, scorpion venom takes some time to have an effect.

The bear wasn't wasting any more time, it went back down on all fours and charged, full tilt, at the boy Jarron. Unfortunately, the young boy froze.

It had taken some time, but Sledge finally got out his deck of cards. At first, he fumbled, but he finally flipped a card up, holding it gingerly between his fore and index finger. It turned out to be the Ace of Clubs. With a flick of his green-skinned wrist, he tossed the card at the bear... and missed completely. Now when I say completely, I mean utterly. It wasn't even close. At best, the bear might have noticed a slight breeze passing its nose as the card went shooting past it.

The tree, on the other hand, for which Sledge was aiming, was struck directly. The card went deep into the wood. Almost immediately there was a cracking sound and the tree fell... right on top of the bear. Jarron was barely able to back-peddle his way out of reach of the raging claws as they swung in desperation to grab him. The creature struggled, desperately trying to wiggle its way out from under a massive tree trunk, but it was having a difficult time. It struggled for a few more minutes until the scorpion venom kicked in. The animal went rigid and then shook for a moment, its muscles contracting uncontrollably. It was only a short time after this the creature's eyes went absolutely white and he lay still.

"Magical scorpions," Goon grinned with unrelenting pride. "Much more potent venom."

Pounder went over to the remains and gave it a solid kick. "Stay away from the boy and next time pick on someone your own size, scumball."

The group sat for a minute, trying to catch their collective breaths. "Are you all wizards?" Jarron asked with the overly excited tone one finds in the average adolescent. It was full of wonder and awe.

"We," Forge said with a plethora of pride, "are warcasters of the goblin clans. Trained in the arts of mystery and the talents of legerdemain."

"So, you do tricks?"

Forge frowned. His voice dropped at least an octave. "Yeah, we do tricks."

"How does magic work?"

"Yeah, Sledge," Goon took a clear interest in the question. "How did you learn your peculiar card trick?"

Sledge sighed. "Most wizards write down their spells in books. You just have to use suitable ink."

Jarron's ears perked up like it was story time around the campfire. "Don't wizards destroy whole villages to make the inks for their spells. Have you ever destroyed a village?"

Pounder let out a snort. "Human wizards do tend to overdo things a bit."

"No," Sledge admitted, "I've never destroyed a village. We're not really wizards. Wizards and sorcerers know lots of spells. We are goblin warcasters. Warcasters are special. We each know how to cast one spell. In fact, goblins don't even have a written language."

"So, how do you write your spells?"

Opening his book, Sledge showed Jarron the pages. He flipped through the pages to show them off. Each page had a handprint in different color inks, although they all seemed to be some shade of red or brown. "In here are the spells of hundreds of goblin warcasters." He turned to the final handprint, about two-thirds of the way through the book. "This is mine." There was unmistakable pride in his voice.

"Is this how you can perform the card trick?" Goon inquired.

"I got it from Munce the Magnificent himself."

"The famous gambler and card player?"

"The very same one."

Pounder cocked his head. "Wait a minute, I thought Munce was dead. Killed in a bar fight over who won a hand of cards."

"Exactly," Sledge explained, "That's how I got the spell. That's Munce's blood on the page, right there. He was my ink."

"Cool," Jarron displayed an excited grin. "How many of the other spells in the book can you do?"

"Just mine," Sledge sounded a little dejected. "That's the way of the warcaster. You only get one spell."

Pounder clicked his fingernails together. "Let this be a lesson to you, young squire. If you're going to learn something, learn one thing really well." He lit his fingertips on fire, but then quickly shook the flames out, having accidentally burned the end of his nose in the demonstration.

Sledge rested his chin on his hand. "So, can four goblins successfully sneak into a human town and steal a sacred weapon?" Forge took out his ball and shook it. Then he gazed down at the results. "What's it say?" Sledge asked.

Forge looked disappointed. "My sources say no."

Sledge crossed his arms. "Why am I not surprised?"

Jarron's eyes lit up with excitement. "Wait, I've got an idea."



The two priests followed a boy into town. The priests had an odd way about them. They walked almost as if they were drunk. With their hoods pulled down to obscure their faces, it was hard to tell if they had been drinking or just clumsy. The only thing clear about their journey was the fact they couldn't walk straight. They were, for lack of a better term, an unusual sight. Unexpectedly, a budge occurred in the stomach area of one of the priest's robes.

"Stop kicking me in the chest," Forge complained.

"Well, walk straight," Sledge protested. "You're supposed to go right when I kick you with my right foot."

"I'm not a mule or a wolf. Besides, how can I walk straight with you on my shoulders? Don't forget, I can't even see where I'm going."

"Reminder," Pounder's voice came from the middle of the other priest's robe, "Human priests don't talk to themselves. In fact, they almost never talk at all. You know, a vow of silence and all that crap."

Sledge threw the hood around and almost exposed his face. "Shut up and walk straight."

The trio walked down the main street, as if still on a long drunken binge.

Jarron directed them up the street. "The temple's up ahead."

At the end of the street, the temple loomed like a giant headstone. There was a towering edifice of square stones and countless flying buttresses. It was so symmetrical, the goblins almost found it offensive. Sledge did, however, think the stained-glass windows were a nice touch. At least they were colorful. He'd have to see if he could figure out how they were made. He stared at it for a moment. It was almost mesmerizing. He might have remained motionless there for weeks but Forge, who couldn't see from beneath the priest's robes, kept walking. Sledge, riding his shoulders, couldn't help but follow. Fortunately, no one in the village seemed to care about the priests. It was almost as if they were afraid of being converted. But in any case, it turned out to be advantageous. They were able to walk right up the temple steps and into the front door without being questioned.

The inside of the temple, it was as disturbingly regular as the outside. The floor was a perfect checkerboard of black and white marble squares. The windows without stained-glass were tall and narrow and distressingly placed at regular intervals. They were all the same size and shape. It left a series of angled light lines on the floor. Goon shook her head. "Don't these people know about slit ray diffraction patterns?" The only good thing about the place was it seemed to be empty.

Sledge climbed down from riding Forge and Goon came leaped from atop Pounder. The priest's robes fell to the floor empty. Pounder shook himself from top to bottom. He gave Goon a one-eyed expression. "If I find any bugs inhabiting my drawers, I'm coming after you with a hammer."

Forge looked at the rest of the group. "I think we need to hear the next part of this story. We need to find the knife."

"Can we find out what it looks like today?"

Taking his black colored ball, Forge gave it a serious shake. "Will we find the knife of Zekki the Deceiver in this temple?" he asked. Forge stared in the tiny window at the bottom.

“What does it say?”

“Yes definitely.”

“Okay,” Sledge announced, “Now we just need to find something when we don’t know what hag-spawned thing looks like.”

“Ball of the Future, will we know it when we find it?” He shook the black ball a second time. He looked up, a small sign of shock on its face. “It says, signs point to yes.”

Pounder didn’t sound impressed... or convinced. “That’s cryptic.”

“Let’s start looking,” Sledge demanded.

“What are we looking for?”

“I don’t know. Start picking up things. If the legends about the knife are true, then when a goblin touches the knife it changes form.”

Pounder cringed. “I’ve heard.”

“So, if you pick it up and it changes into something else, we know we have it.”

The other goblins all gave an exhausted moan. The room as full of objects. Cups, holy symbols, hymn books, choir folders, candle holders, writing implements, doors, tables, chairs, plates, forks, spoons, water fountains... the list went on and on. Jarron, however, took up the challenge with a grin. For him, it was like a game of hid and seek. Find the object which changed when you touched it.

Things seemed to be going along rather well until Goon started taking a bath in the fountain.

Sledge gave her a cross-eyed stare. “Goon, focus. Please focus.”

Still, everything they picked up stayed the same. Pounder even tried to hold one of the forks upside down, to see if holding them this way made them change form. He shook it. No luck. Pounder, at least, was starting to get frustrated. And, as everyone knows, a frustrated goblin is not a happy goblin. It wouldn’t be long before Pounder started breaking things. Or burning them.

The doors leading off the main hall led to other rooms. Forge grunted, the first door he opened, led to a room filled with chairs. Hundreds of them. Chairs stacked upon other chairs. He closed the door in disgust. Different doors led to similarly disappointing rooms with even more collections of seemingly random objects. Pounder’s face was turning yellow. Not a good sign.

Goon opened one door and instantly closed it. She stood there, with her back against the door as if she was barring something from exiting the room.

“What?” Sledge asked.

“There’s someone in there.”

“Dragon droppings. Everyone,” Sledge hissed, “quiet down.”

Sledge carefully opened the door, just a crack, and peeked through the opening. Kneeling on the floor was a young woman dressed in a highly transparent gown. Sledge realized she was what the humans would call, quite attractive. Long, flowing locks of dark brown hair, bright hazel eyes, and high cheekbones. Sledge didn't care much for the ivory color of the skin. Not enough green to suit his tastes. Even Jarron's skin had a dark, earthy tone to it which Sledge found more acceptable. The ivory tone clearly screamed aristocrat, and goblins, being mostly common folk, had no interest in mixing with such types. Sledge carefully closed the door to make sure it didn't make any sound. "Everybody keep looking. We'll check this room last. And for the sake of our ancestors, kept the noise down."

After Sledge yelled this to everyone, he turned away sheepishly and quietly returned to picking up objects without making a further ruckus. Sledge picked up a book. It didn't change, but he opened its pages to double-check. The words formed a beautiful flowing melody like music dancing across the page. And the hand-drawn illustrations weren't bad either. He sighed. Someday he'll have to learn how to read. Forcing himself not to be distracted by the book's contents, he laid the tome back down on the table. Strange how a book can influence you. It's sort of an unnatural effect. They can make you think.

"Wait a minute," Sledge said out loud, "Wait one egg-picking minute." His volume was now increasing, his tone turned almost harsh.

"What now?" Pounder responded.

"Since when does the Temple of the Holy Celestial allow women to pass through its doors?"

"Never," Jarron replied, "They wouldn't even let my mother in after she died."

"I knew it." Sledge spat. "I'm such a moron."

He went back to the door and opened it. This time he didn't bother to take any precautions about making a noise. The others followed him into the room to see what was going on. The woman continued to kneel on the floor. It was as if she was praying. The goblins and Jarron blinked at the see-through garment she wore. It was... well... totally see-through.

Pounder snorted. "The last god was male, wasn't he?"

Goon gave him a tilted glance. "Yeah, why?"

"Figures," pounder grunted.

Goon looked confused. "I don't get it."

Before the discussion had a chance to progress, Sledge approached the young woman stealthy. Reaching out with one hand, he tapped her on the shoulder with one finger. In a flash, the woman was gone. A knife clattered to the floor. It was magnificent. There was not a spot of rust on it anywhere. It was clean and bright, perfectly formed as if built... not by a blacksmith... but by an artist of unmatched skill. The platinum glowed in the light as if covered in a translucent sheath. The handle was made of solid gold. The yellow metal glinted in the sun. Almost like the hazel eyes of the young woman. The handle was beautifully wrapped with twists of dark brown leather.

Sledge stepped back. "I thought so."

“Wait a minute,” Goon asked, “she was the knife all along?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, fancy that.”

“I told you it made sense,” Pounder insisted.

While they were chatting, the knife remained on the floor. Only it didn't stay a knife. Without anyone doing anything, they found the woman standing before them again. She, like the knife, appeared as if her form was molded by the hands of a master artisan. She was, to put it bluntly, perfect in every way. “Hello, my name is Couteau. I've been waiting ever so long for you to arrive. Are you going to take me home now?”

“Would you be willing to accompany us, my lady Couteau?”

“It would be my pleasure.”



The group waited until night fell. In the dark, it would be easier to slip out of town. Jarron was giddy. “Thanks for taking me along. My dad is going to be so angry with me for coming home late. But I wouldn't have missed it for the world. It was so much fun...”

Jarron absent-mindedly opened the front door of the temple and walked out into the steps, not looking at where he was going. Turning around, he froze. “...Okay, maybe not so much fun.” In the street was a group of 40, maybe 50 human swordsmen, weapons drawn. Pounder quickly pulled the lad back into the temple and closed the door. “What are they doing out there?”

“They must have heard the noise.”

“But what are they doing out there? I mean, in the street?”

“You're not allowed to bring weapons into the temple,” Jarron explained.

“So, they are just going to wait for us to leave?”

“Or starve us out,” Sledge explained.

“I think it's time to open the box,” Pounder announced. He took the box he'd been so long-suffering in carrying and placed it on the ground. The group took a step back to gaze at the box. After all, they'd been told to think twice before opening it.

Jarron noticed a piece of paper on one side of the box. He hadn't seen it before because it had been hidden by Pounder's back. He casually walked up to the box and read the writing on the paper label. “What's M61 Vulcan mean?”

“Beats the crap out of me,” Pounder muttered.

“I guess there is nothing for it,” Sledge announced. “Pounder, open it up.”

Pounder twisted open one latch, hesitated, but then opened the second latch. Deftly he flipped up the lid. He jumped back as if expecting something to leap out at him, clawing and fighting. But the inside of the box lay inert. None of the goblins had ever seen anything remotely like it. It seemed to be a series of hollow black rods arranged like they were six axles for a wagon wheel. At one end was a metal case, the same color as the tubes. It was bizarrely covered with odd knobs and switches. The haphazard nature of the knobs seemed comforting to the goblins.

The whole thing smelled of oil and well... to be quite honest... death.

For a moment, no one moved. Pounder was the first one to regain his composure. Perhaps because he had been carrying it for so long. For him, there was already a connection. He leaned down and touched the hollow black tubes with a finger. The knowledge of how to use it flowed into Pounder like the first rays of dawn spreading across the sky. This was true magic.

He reached down and grabbed the device's strap, throwing it over his shoulder. It hefted the peculiar-looking item out of the box and held it in front of him. The rectangular case almost touching his chest and the rods facing away from him. It looked heavy. From out of the black case, a long, flat chain flowed down to the floor and back into the box. The chain followed him as he headed for the temple door, clanking loudly across the marble floor.

"Someone open the door for me," Pounder demanded. "My hands are full."

Jarron rushed up and opened the temple doors. The goblins had an advantage. Their eyes were meant to see in the near darkness, with only the light of the stars to show anything. Still, a sword blade is a sword blade. Even in the dark, they are dangerous things if used by someone who knows how to wield them. Against all hope, these men appeared both determined and experienced. Pounder stepped forward like a mighty beast and walked down the first few steps of the temple stairs. In the street stood the guards, ready to kill. They were well-covered in gleaming plate armored from head to toe, their helmet visors closed, swords drawn menacingly.

Pounder snorted with glee. "This is really going to piss them off."

He held up the mysterious object as if it were a lance, pointing the rods at the soldiers. Without so much as a trumpet blare, the thing started making a terrible noise, smoke and flames billowed from the tubes as they spun around with the speed of a child's top. "Batp-a-tat, batp-a-tat, batp-a-tat, batp-a-tat, batp-a-tat, batp-a-tat," the mysterious device sang out at incredible speed. Barbs of hot lead sprang out from the spinning ends of the hollow rods. Holes appeared in armor and men fell. Screams filled the air. The chain jumped and clanged. Strange brass casings jumped and flew through the air, but Pounder was not to be distracted. He waved the bellowing device in one direction and then another, spraying death in an ever-widening arc. More men fell.

The last few seemed to understand their fate and turned to beat a hasty retreat. But Pounder would have none of it. He sprayed them with fire and bodkin points of lead. The last few he took with their backs pointed toward him. Pounder was not to be deterred. Once all the men had fallen, the blare of the device ran down as if it was a mill wheel bereft of water. The sounds died down and the spinning of the rods slowed and then stopped altogether. Fine whiffs of smoke poured from the black metal tubes and rose slowly into the still air.

Pounder smiled, showing all four rows of his sharpened teeth. "I like it."

No one even dared to show their faces in the street as Pounder lovingly repacked the M61 back in its smooth-looking box. He hiked it back upon his back, his face still beaming. Not a soul could be seen on the streets as the six walked back out of town.

Sledge sounded remorseful as he turned to Couteau. "I'm sorry you had to see that, my lady."

"That's all right," she smiled back at him. "I actually quite enjoyed it."

"That's a goblin's knife for you," Pounder laughed. "Enjoying carnage."

EIGHT YEARS LATER...

A young man of about eighteen, who very strongly resembled an adult Jarron, wiped off a glass container with a cloth. Zekki the Deceiver's knife sat under the cleaned glass, like the respected and revered relic it was. The goblin warcaster students all stared at it with awe. Almost as much as they admired Sledge, the warcaster who could read and knew more than one spell.

"That's my best memory of how it all started," Sledge explained to the students in the class, "There are other versions in my memory, but that's the one I recall the most often."