

The Goon, The Brat, and The Unruly

Part I

For Wunderkind

Chapter 1

The Goon

Two entered the throne room of Queen Zirneklis:

The first was an orc, wearing a black trench coat that billowed around his ankles, the chest parted to reveal a white shirt tucked into a pair of brown slacks. Although he had scrubbed his clothes to a professional sheen, they weren't much to look at. But who cared? It was what he had to *offer* that would interest the Kytton queen.

To further convey respect, with one hand he removed his fedora, uncovering an angular—but clean—orken head.

From years of experience flogging haberdashery in Polywerp, he learned that it was the salesman's eyes that seized the deal; eyes that said: *You can trust me.*

His eyes, however, recessed into dark sockets, gleamed yellow; the eyes of a cat spying a mouse. His sharp fangs—scrubbed pearly white—ruined any attempts at a smile.

Neat clothes, pleasantries, boot-licking... these were the compensations he had to make for being an orc.

He was known as The Goon, and nothing else.

'Hurry up!' he said. With his other hand he yanked the leash to which Eli was attached. This was the second "visitor": a fifteen-old-human with brown, bowl-cut hair, and dressed in shabby clothes with hands bound behind his back.

Eli croaked, stumbled forward, knees nearly buckling. He looked up at The Goon with crystal-blue eyes that said, *Not so hard, dumbass.*

The Goon often wondered if it were Eli's performance—not his—which cinched deals. He'd the pretty blue eyes for it, anyway.

Queen Zirneklis waited atop a carpeted stair, perched on a limestone throne, an arm on each rest. Pewter torches crackled beside her, sheening her pantheresque body.

For a royalty, The Goon thought her plainly dressed: a battle-bra and bronze shin guards. And judging from the pink scars in her fur, she'd certainly seen her share of battles—probably from the scramble to claim Queen Yorlandi's throne.

Her bodyguard loomed behind her, a burly, thick-skinned goblin/orc crossbreed with sagging jowls, a pug nose and rusted armour. He was identical to the oafs escorting The Goon into the throne room, beating the ground behind him with their booted feet.

Moronic personnel, lacklustre garbs, cheap throne... after the murder of her predecessor, The Goon knew the Kytton kingdom was in economic straits, but he'd no idea things were *this* bad.

Unfortunately, this would alter Eli's pricing.

Another fruitless quest, he thought.

The queen waited, feline eyes shining like emeralds, ever watching.

When they reached the foot of the chancel. Eli began to cry.

'I wanna go home...' he said. '*Please*, I just wanna go home.'

The Goon looked at Eli. *Damn, he's good*, he thought.

Mouth crooking into the best smile he could manage, The Goon said, 'I must apologise, Your Majesty, for this cur's behaviour. He'd come from a rich family—a *very* rich family—you see, from Polywerp, and he'd been spoiled. Spoiled *rotten*.'

Queen Zirneklis rolled her eyes, her pupils narrowed to slit.

'Let's move things along,' she said in a scratchy, damaged voice. 'You're already late, for a start. Tell me: why should I want another slave? And what makes this'—she pointed at Eli with a razor claw—'boy here so special?'

'Well, he—'

Before The Goon could finish Eli sprinted forward. Zirneklis half rose from her throne and her bodyguard poised his spear. The guards behind The Goon unsheathed their blades.

Eli froze a step before the chancel.

'Please, *please*,' said Eli. 'Make him let me go! My parents, they'll be worried about me. *Please*. They'll pay you whatever you want, just—'

The Goon yanked the noose, causing Eli to stagger back and hit the ground. He then grabbed the boy's hair and hoisted him to his feet.

The guards eased a little. But Queen Zirneklis looked pissed.

‘Again, my deepest apologies,’ said The Goon, bowing his head. His heart was pounding. ‘And I’m sorry for being a tad late. Again, this boy was pampered before, and I had to help him... *come to terms* with his new life.

‘Now, to answer your question, *Your Majesty*, this boy’s family is very rich. His father is the editor of The Polywerp Times and his mother is of noble blood. Should you ransom him back to his family, you’re guaranteed to make a hefty profit.’

Maybe then you could buy a proper throne.

‘Oh really?’ said Queen Zirneklis. ‘I assume you have proof of this?’

‘I do.’

The Goon, holding the fedora under his arm, took from his trench coat the documentation confirming Eli’s legitimacy. All forged, of course.

A guard delivered them to Queen Zirneklis. She studied the papers, stroking her wavering tail with one hand like it were a pet snake. Her luminous gaze switched between the papers and The Goon, as if trying to determine his authenticity.

The sheets had been printed by a contact in Polywerp, who specialised in migration visas. He thrived on the sudden influx of Kyttons fleeing the chaos of Queen Yorlandi’s death, and so could afford to lower his prices. Still, faked documents weren’t cheap. They were almost an investment in themselves.

Queen Zirneklis The Goon a sudden hard stare. Her tail flopped agitatedly.

The game’s up, he thought. He felt the urge to reach for his blunderbuss he kept holstered at his hip... but it’d been confiscated by the gatekeeper.

Even Eli had stopped snivelling and stared at the queen in what looked like dismay. If they were caught, Queen Zirneklis—going by

her reputation—wouldn't *command* their arrest. She'd sooner rake them to death herself.

Mission aborted, The Goon was ready to turn tail and flee whenever Queen Zirneklis said, 'Everything seems to be in order.'

The Goon resisted a laugh.

'But one thing concerns me,' she said. 'If this slave's so valuable, why don't you ransom him off yourself? Why be a middle man?'

Remembering his cue, Eli started whinging.

'Hey,' said The Goon, raising his hands, rope in one, fedora in the other, 'I'm just a goon. A kidnapper. Besides, there are others—unlike yourself, Your Majesty—that judge only by looks. Humans take one look at me and think they can't trust me. Because of that, I try not to deal with them. And also, the sooner I sell, the sooner I'm able to kidnap again, and start the process over. I make money quicker that way. Pray, understand.'

'I do understand,' said Queen Zirneklis. Her bodyguard stood a gormless statue behind her. 'I'm certainly interested in doing business. What is your offer?'

'For you, Your Majesty, five thousand polies and he's yours.' Five grand seemed reasonable, given the state of her economy. Boy slaves normally sold for twice that amount.

Twiddling a whisker, Queen Zirneklis re-crossed her feline legs and considered.

Come on. What's there to think about? Five is for nothing, you stingy bitch.

'Three thousand,' said Queen Zirneklis.

Three? The damn papers cost me two!

'I'm afraid, *Your Majesty*, I can't let him go for any less than four thousand. I went through a lot of trouble to capture him, and I travelled far to meet, personally, with you. By selling him back to his parents—'

'I wanna go home!' screamed Eli.

‘—you’re guaranteed to at least *double* your investment. If not *triple*.’

Queen Zirneklis hemmed and hawed for a moment...

‘Fine. Four it is. Even if it’s just to teach *that boy* some manners.’

The Goon laughed—a cackle which bounced in the echoic chamber. Eli suddenly thrashed on the spot, squirming on his feet, wrestling with his binds, until a guard hauled him over a broad shoulder. Eli kicked and wriggled.

‘*No! No! Lemme go! Lemme go!*’

‘Carlik!’ called the queen. The guard lugging Eli turned to her with a snort. ‘Lock the boy in the dungeon, cell four.’

‘*Nooooooooooooo!*’

‘Dingo’ –the other guard— ‘fetch the merchant his money. And don’t make him wait.’

Moving surprisingly quick for *gorcs* (as The Goon called crossbreeds) they chugged down the aisle with Eli and out of the throne room.

Satisfied with a done deal, The Goon waved his fedora, bowed, and said, ‘Pleasure doing business with you, *Your Majesty*.’

Chapter 2

The Brat

Eli woke at the brink of dusk. His cell had no windows, as expected. But he never relied on the sun, moon or other devices to tell the time; he counted on his own internal clock.

He swung his legs out of bed. He gazed around his cell until he was fully wakened. His tattered mattress hung on chains like a hammock, good for rocking oneself to sleep, although they rattled when he fidgeted. A fly-ridden bucket, serving as a chamber pot, lay tipped over in one corner. Stale bread and a pitcher of milk sat beside it.

Eli was hungry, but he dared not touch the stuff.

The walls were concrete and the door was of thick wood, a slit at the top for peeking. A flickering paraffin lantern, hanging from the ceiling, provided the only light in the room.

You seen one dungeon, you seen them all.

Yawning, stretching, Eli slipped into his boots and hopped off the bed and looked out the door. He was fortunate: the guard (another brainless goblin half-breed) was sitting at a desk thirty feet away at a corner, his horned helmet sitting on the floor. Though his back was to Eli, he could see that the guard was playing a game, picking up little checkers, gawking, making dumb noises and setting them down.

If he remembered correctly (and he always did) the Kytton's dungeon ran underground on the border of their kingdom. Cell four was approximately a hundred paces from the Kytton well—now long closed off and run dry.

Eli's internal clock told him that it was near 6:00 p.m. If he wanted to accomplish The Perfect Escape, he'd have to act fast. It was better not to keep The Goon waiting.

But he had to do something about that guard.

Pacing around his cell, Eli scoped for makeshift weapons.

The chamber pot in corner looked promising. Batting the flies, he looked into it. It was clean, thank God. He weighed it by the handle, found that it was light as tin.

'Shit. No good,' said Eli.

He turned to the pitcher of milk and lifted it by the handle. Because of the thick glass it weighed about five, six kilos. Not bad, but gorcs had thick skulls (hence less brain) so it would only stun the guard, not knock him out.

Of course, Eli could always *sneak* past him, but that was risky. If he was caught, he'd be moved to another cell (with the crap knocked out of him for good measure), delaying his inevitable escape. And The Goon wasn't one to wait. He had his money and, to him, losing Eli would only be collateral damage.

Also, Eli didn't want to imagine to look on Queen Fleabag's face when she discovered that the 'rich parents' didn't exist, or when the *real* editor of The Polywerp Times claimed to never have heard of a ratbag called Eli. In that instance, he'd be tried for treason and put to death: a slow hanging or, even slower, fed to their zoo of big cats.

Eli rubbed his neck. The Goon... he'd been rough this time, with the rope. And he'd even hauled him off the floor by his *scalp*.

He'd met The Goon a year ago in the city of Cavallo, when Eli was a thirteen-year-old orphan living life in the dirt, stealing food and pilfering from merchant wagons. One day, he'd been spotted, and ran for his grubby life through the stall-clustered market, chased by a merchant who'd abandoned his caravan to apprehend the "thieving little bastard". Eli bumped into The Goon, literally, who—upon being bombarded with pleas—gave the merchant a bum tip, saving Eli from an early life in Shark Lake prison.

Of course, The Goon's intentions were far from noble. He kidnapped Eli (as if he had a family to be kidnapped *from*) with plans to sell him to aristocracy.

Eli, however, proposed a deal: *Sell me, save me, and sell me again. With this arrangement, we can virtually print money.*

Thus a partnership was born. The Goon would sell Eli, hatch an escape later that night, and split the loot (in The Goon's favour, as per usual. Maximum benefit for minimum risk—the disadvantage of

being an apprentice). Together, they swindled countless organisations and provinces: Izmora, Firehawk, the Vek tribe, Lion's Den Arena...

Yet, in all the heists they'd pulled together, Eli never learned anything about The Goon—not even his real name. He was an orc, definitely (no mistaking the dark eyes, gritty skin and snub nose) who had travelled from Polywerp in his twenties. *That* much Eli discovered.

But what did he do? What was his history? Did he have a family?

The closest thing he had to a family was probably Eli... and The Goon was the closest thing *he* could call family. Which made Eli feel pathetic. Was it *his* fault that his parents had been devoured by the Wilder Clan when he was eleven, leaving him to scour the streets for scraps of food and clothing?

But here he was. Once a lowlife pilferer, now a shady dealer's underdog.

What a promotion.

Eli had been pondering for fifteen minutes. No doubt The Goon had lowered the rope down the well and waited for him; how long he'd wait Eli couldn't guess.

He lifted the pitcher of milk and put it in the bucket. Lugging the it over to the door, he prized from a niche in his boot a lock pick—something which resembled a dentist's scraper. Routine pat-downs always failed to find it.

What made this particular pick unique was how the blade could be manipulated by hand to suit different locks. He got it from The Goon, The Goon from one of his many backstreet contacts. In dangerous situations, the pick could also be used as a knife. Thankfully, Eli never needed this particular feature.

He'd never been caught escaping, and he wasn't starting now.

'Showtime,' he said.

He inserted the pick into the lock and, ever so quietly, while listening for the grunt of an alerted guard, fiddled around, trying to get a good feel of its mechanisms.

Satisfied with what he was working with, Eli thumbed the pick into a shape which suited the lock. It was one he'd foiled many times before. Picking at the tumblers, he negotiated the door into unlocking—*click!*

Job done.

What amateurs, he thought.

Bucket in hand, he eased the door open, praying that Kyttons kept their hinges well oiled. As it turned out, they did—the door opened without a squeak.

He pocketed his trusty pick.

Thirty feet away, the orc-goblin twiddled with his playing pieces, as if searching for some secret button that would activate it. *Things have to be dire in the Kytton kingdom*, thought Eli, *if they have to hire these half-wits.*

Eli scanned the floor—for anything that could rattle, roll or break, alerting the guard.

Nothing.

Eli's boots were rubber-soled. He moved noiselessly, towards the gorc.

He held the bucket steadily.

Ten feet away...

The guard was oblivious.

Nearly there, come on, come to daddy...

At five feet away, Eli whispered, '*Psst!*'

With a confused yawn that sounded like *hwuagh?*, the guard looked around, and Eli swung the bucket against the side of his heavy-jowled face, making a resonant *dong!* The pitcher inside smashed like a bell. A rounded brown tooth flew in the air and tickled along the ground. The guard—with a surprised *Ugh!*—tumbled over in his chair and rolled to the floor. Eli, stepping over the guard, raised

the sloshing bucket, ready to pound him with it if he were still conscious.

He wasn't. His eyes were closed. His jaw hung open like a drunk's. His mousy ears twitched.

He started snoring.

Eli breathed deep, shaking with a shot of adrenaline.

All of a sudden, others awoke in their cells peered out their doors. They were all fur-faced Kyttons, most likely imprisoned during the stampede for Queen Yorlandi's throne.

Not that politics interested Eli. In fact, it bored the crap out of him.

One leopard face stared out at Eli, his eyes glowing in lamplight.

In a conspiratorial whisper: 'Hey! Kid! Let me outta here. I'll make it worth your while.'

Others joined in a humdrum of begs and promises.

I've no time for this, thought Eli. Although one guard patrolled each block of the dungeon—according to The Goon's info—another could be on the way to swap shifts, or to investigate the cacophony Eli had just made.

Eli remembered his bearings. The well was to the east, less than a minute's sprint away.

He headed in that direction.

'Hey, where are you going?' said the leopard. 'Kid! Get back here! You better not *run*, you little *bastard!*'

Eli did run, through the dank dungeon corridor, spat at, hissed on all sides—

'You little shit! Get back—'

'—gonna rip your head off you—'

'—you coward—'

'—will feast upon you—'

Smiling, Eli continued running. He smiled because he had power, he was free, and in control.

Where the hell was Eli?

The Goon's fob watch read 6:20. On many occasions the boy ran five, sometimes ten minutes late. Understandable: Eli had no way of telling the time in the slammer. But he'd always been good at keeping hours—a knack probably got from living the slum life in Cavallo.

What if something went wrong? What if they discovered the lock pick?

What if he'd been caught?

These questions always tormented The Goon while he waited at their rendezvous point. Every time, however, Eli would turn up grinning, casually late and without worry.

The Goon could never understand humans.

He turned from the well and glanced around him, at the rocky wasteland patched with dried grass and skeletal trees, the sky now changed from a bloody crimson to a sullen blue. Stars twinkled in their dozens. The cold night air ruffled The Goon's coat. His breath was a fine mist.

In the horizon, a mile west, lay the Kytton kingdom in the flat, weedy plains; normally bright with night life, it now looked like the dregs of a city the eve before ruin.

The Wilder Clan have certainly done damage, thought The Goon.

The time: 6:25. Another five minutes and The Goon would have to cut his losses and leave. Eli had proved useful. He never failed to astound The Goon with his escapist tricks and survival instinct. He put the *art* in con-artist.

But The Goon had noticed a change in him. The boy had started acting more comfortable, cocky. His boyish shyness and complacency he remembered from a year ago had faded, and he started demanding

greater cuts of the spoils: eighty/twenty evened to seventy/thirty... now more recently sixty/forty....

The Goon didn't like that. Though he recognised Eli as an integral cog in their operations, the boy was just a tool, no different from The Goon's feigned politeness and salesmanship gabber. A horse may get you to your destination, but in the end, it's the rider who is the master. The rider is the one with the whip.

6:28. In another two minutes, none of this would matter—he'd have to abandon Eli. As well as night-partiers, Kyttons were nocturnal hunters. If a hunter—or a royal guard—discovered The Goon in the arsehole of nowhere with a rope reeled into the Kytton dungeon, it'd no doubt draw suspicion... and weapons.

The Goon had no qualms about whipping out his blunderbuss and blasting a kitty-cat goodnight, but he wanted to avoid bloodshed. A bounty was on his head in several towns for robbery and treason, and adding murder to the list wouldn't help.

Just as he was ready to coil the rope, locate his horse tied a quarter mile away and ride out with one hundred percent of the loot, Eli appeared in a pool of light at the bottom of the well.

'Yodelayheehoo!' His teenage voice funnelled upwards.

The Goon cringed. 'Where the hell *were* you?' he said, his own voice echoing. 'Get your ass up here!'

He watched Eli shimmy up the rope like a graceful monkey.

Oh well, he thought. Better luck next time.

Eli exercised his shoulder blades. The well was deep—about fifty feet he reckoned—so his arms felt like boiled noodles.

But he still managed a victorious grin.

'Easy-squeezy,' said Eli. The Goon was lidding the well, his coat flapping in a gust of cold wind. 'Only one guard this time,' he continued, 'and he wouldn't have noticed a brass orchestra marching past him. Shame... I thought I would've sold for *more*, but I guess,

judging by the Kytton kingdom...’ He thumbed in its direction. ‘Well, four thousand polies was pretty decent. Whaddaya think?’

The Goon engaged the padlock that had secured the well. He had lock-picked it himself. ‘If it was so easy, what the hell took you? You were half an hour late. You’re lucky I didn’t let your arse rot down there.’ The Goon said this with his upper lip curled in a snarl.

Uh-oh, I really pissed him off big time.

Eli shrugged. ‘Slept in.’

The Goon stormed past Eli, his boots crunching on gravel.

Eli hurried up to him. ‘Hey, you got the loot?’

The Goon stopped. He looked back at Eli, eyes glimmering under the shade of his fedora. The only light that night was the silvery glow of a full moon.

The Goon took out a roll from his pocket and tossed it to Eli.

Untying its bind, Eli counted: a thousand polies.

‘What the... What the hell do you call *this*?’

Back to Eli, he said, ‘That’s your pay, and it’s going to be from now on. Get used to it. You were half an hour late. You pissed off Queen Whatever-Her-Name-Is, dropping your value. And because of your excess whinging, I had to settle for this... *child’s allowance*. You depreciate me, I depreciate you. It’s only fair.’

Actually, Eli believed his performance had earned them *more*.

‘But this isn’t even...’ said Eli. ‘No. I want the usual cut. A *better* cut. Fifty-fifty.’

The Goon uttered a cackle.

‘Well come on,’ said Eli. ‘Show me it.’

The Goon sauntered onwards. Eli ran in front of him, squaring up. At six-foot-two, The Goon outmatched Eli by five inches and fifty pounds. As if to underline the confrontation, a tumbleweed rolled past them.

‘I want my money,’ said Eli.

‘If you don’t like it,’ said the fedora-wearing goon, ‘you can go home, back to that shanty town you call Cavallo, and eat rats off the

streets or whatever you did before I came along and made a man out of you. There's always more orphans willing to do your dirty work—who'd be happy enough with a horseshit sandwich as pay. It's up to you.'

Eli's heart pounded in his chest.

'Yeah, yeah, ya think so? How many orphans—hell, how many damn *soldiers*—would be willing to put their ass on the line like I have? How many would be brave to sneak under the noses of elites and murders and scoundrels? How many can pick locks? Make weapons outta playthings? Switch between a cutesy cuddle-bug routine and a master of espionage? Face it, Goon, you've no one except me. You *need* me. And I demand a fair cut for doing all the shit you're too cowardly to do yourself.'

The Goon's lip curled again, baring wolfish fangs. He grumbled from the pit of his throat. At that moment, the moon disappeared behind a rack of clouds, blanketing the plains in darkness, making The Goon's eyes burn like fire in his shadowed face.

Eli didn't doubt for a second that The Goon wanted to draw his blunderbuss and make his head disappear; he didn't put it past him.

But he couldn't stop now. The Goon was on the ropes.

He felt the hairs prickle the back his neck.

'And I know what you're thinking,' said Eli. "*That boy's probably too big for his boots.*" Well I'm not. We're partners, you and me, whether you like it or not. Don't forget: *I'm* the one who came up with this idea, and if it weren't for me you'd still be peddling slaves for loose change.

'I'm not asking for much. Only for my fair whack, what I deserve. If you leave me with this'—he brandished his fan of polies—'Yeah, fair enough, I'll piss off and you'll never see me again. Then you can go back to the recruitment centre who'll *happily* supply you with a list of con-artists, I'm sure. So what will it be?'

Eli held out his hand, ignoring how it trembled.

Inhaling long and deep, The Goon fetched another roll of polies and slammed into to Eli's palm.

Holy shit. It worked. He's given me my money.

'Thank you,' said Eli.

Without a word, The Goon walked on. Their horse neighed in the distance.

Eli pocketed his wage and caught up with The Goon.

No more words were exchanged. Everything was said that needed to be said.

Chapter 3

The Unruly

Of all the goblins of all the clans, none were more vicious than Voonder.

Holden realised this eight months ago when met Voonder in his hometown, Shark Lake, when the Wilder Clan Warlord was a manacled prisoner in a cell. The wild and terrible goblin had been arrested for plundering villages, devouring men and children, wreaking havoc in civilised towns. It was Zarmn, the Wilder Clan's Warlord at the time, who had graced on Voonder. Goblins were untamed, ruthless and anarchistic, disliked by human and beast alike, and reviled by keepers of peace and harmony.

Voonder, however, had taken it too far.

Since his teenage years, the goblin had fed upon untold numbers of young humans. Instead of relying on trade to fund his clan, Voonder chose to pillage from caravans and nearby villages to fuel the treasury. One by one cities stopped negotiating. Trade ceased. Coffers dried up. After a decade of patience (delayed only by Voonder's popularity with other goblins), Zarmn ended Voonder's rampage by betraying him to the Polywerp authorities... who had been desperate to screw the cretin's head on a pike.

However, Voonder was Holden's only hope.

Thirteen at the time, the boy paid the bloodthirsty goblin a visit, promising to hatch his escape—but under one condition: if Voonder helped Holden to rescue his sister, Melissa, from the Wilder Clan. She was a stable girl, who fed and tended to horses. However, the sixteen-year-old had grown into a fine businesswoman, negotiating trades with the neighbouring utopia of Polywerp. Their father, a horsemaster, saw for her a bright future.

One summer morning, travelling across grasslands with a band of horses, The Wilder clan attacked the caravan, distinguishable by their black kerchiefs. The horses were slaughtered, money stolen. Some stable boys were devoured on the spot, the rest presumed captured and enslaved.

Melissa, thankfully, was not found among the dead. Goblins sometimes enslaved females, but rarely did they eat them.

For obvious reasons Holden couldn't rescue his sister by himself: First, he didn't know where the Wilder Clan dwelled. Second, even if he *did* know, to trespass without imperial protection was suicide. He would be eaten or subjugated amongst the other captives.

He needed Voonder. He didn't trust him, but he *needed* him.

Striking a deal, Holden had freed Voonder, ensuring cooperation by stating that, if Voonder suddenly turned on him, it would be the lid on the Wilder Clan's coffin. War would be waged, trade routes choked.

And Voonder wouldn't want to do that to his clan.

So they had travelled together, trudging through the thickets of Savage Forest, and into the Wilder Clan's lair hidden in an underground cavern. Inside, Voonder bludgeoned Warlord Zarmn with a mace and claimed the throne to the cheers of his fan base.

True to his word, Voonder released Melissa.

And put Holden in her place.

Eight months now, Holden served as Voonder's personal *assistant*—suffering the brunt of Voonder's jokes, waiting at parties, forced to obey every whim. Doing this, he was safe from becoming dinner. But there were compensations being Voonder's lapdog: he got to wear his own clothes, and other goblins dared not touch him for fear of Voonder's wrath.

He was Voonder's golden-haired, blue-eyed pet, untouchable, yet sufferable to the Warlord's schizophrenic bouts of generosity and rage.

But to Holden's parents and loved ones, he was as good as dead.

Abandon All Hope Ye Enslaved by the Wilder Clan.

This evening Voonder was expecting company. A merchant, to be exact. Occasionally, merchants visited the good Warlord to offer

slaves—orphans kidnapped and sold for quick bucks. It was practically livestock delivery.

Holden sat at the right of the throne, on a red blanket on the floor. Chin propped on hands, he watched his shadow twist and writhe with the crackle of the torch behind him. Voonder was slouched on his throne. His personal advisor, Larcomn, stood to his left, wearing a yellow cowl, summoned for the price negotiations.

Voonder said nothing. He entertained himself with the shadow of his hand.

The advisor stood quiet.

Holden sighed silently. He consulted his watch: 7:00 p.m.

Somewhere, behind a closed door, a boy squealed for mercy. His screams intensified... and were cut short. *It must be dinner time*, thought Holden. He had chicken drumsticks himself. Another perk of being Voonder's footstool. Good food.

Holden sighed again. The merchant was running late. Who on earth risked through Savage Forest at *this* hour? When all things carnivorous came alive...

The tall wooden doors at the end of the throne room bellowed open and a gatekeeper marched in wearing chainmail and a helmet. With a sharp smile, he bowed and said, 'Lord Voonder, the merchant has arrived.'

Playing with his hand, Voonder said, 'About time.'

The guard hurried out. *Livestock delivery*, thought Holden.

Eli and The Goon were led on each side by goblin guards and into a stone-panelled throne room. A black carpet rolled before Warlord Voonder's seat.

The transaction had been initiated a week in advance. They were met outside Savage Forest by two Wilder Clan scouts, who led them safely through Savage Forest. Eli and The Goon agreed to conduct the heist in the evening, after dinner time (a late trek through a man-

eating jungle was worth the risk it meant Eli wouldn't be on the menu that particular night).

And it wasn't just the forest that worried Eli. Every so often, a goblin would look him up and down, lick a red tongue along his teeth. Eli was used to this. The flesh-eating Vek tribe had done the same thing.

But compared to Wilder Clan, those savages had chivalry.

This was be his most dangerous stint yet...

'So what's next on the agenda?' Eli had asked at an inn ten miles outside the Kytton province. They drank congratulatory drinks. Eli had paid.

'I have an idea,' said The Goon, 'but I'm not sure if you're up for it.'

Eli grinned. 'Hell, I'll be up for it. It can't be more dangerous than anything we've already pulled. Come on, tell me.'

'No. Forget about it.'

Eli gave The Goon a hard stare.

'Alright,' said The Goon, 'but it was just a thought. I was thinking we tackle the Wilder Clan.'

Eli's grin dropped. 'Wilder Clan?'

'Yeah. Told you you wouldn't be up for it.'

'Not true. Just... why the Wilder Clan?'

'You know how they use humans as slaves?'

'And food,' said Eli.

'Yeah, and food. Well, I was thinking you'd fetch a pretty sum with them. A lot more than what whisker-face gave us. I'm thinking twenty thousand polies.'

'*Twenty* thousand? But... why would they pay so much when they kidnap kids themselves? Besides, who's to say that I'll even live long enough to see my share? These aren't twine-batting kittens we'll be dealing with. For all we know they could gut me the second you close the door.'

‘Yeah, I thought you’d be afraid,’ The Goon grinned, sipping his whisky.

‘I’m not afraid, it’s just...’

‘But here’s the good part: I won’t be selling you for food. I’ll be selling you the way I’ve always sold you, convincing the Warlord he could make a profit on you—provided that you’re unspoiled. Trust me. You won’t be touched.’

‘In theory.’

‘Yes, in theory. It’s a risk, but if it’s pulled off it means we can live comfortably for a long time. Maybe move to another continent, make a fresh start, with brand-spanking new takers and without having to glance over our shoulders all the time.’

Eli hadn’t been thinking of the risk. Nursing his root beer, he thought of how the Wilder Clan put him into this life of crime by murdering his parents and leaving him to learn the rules of the street—beg, steal and swindle for survival. Not only that, Cavallo was rife with orphans like himself because of the Wilder Can.

What Eli had in mind was revenge. Compensation.

Agreeing to The Goon’s proposal, the letter was sent the next day by an unofficial courier, and in that week they had studied maps and blueprints of the clan’s hideout (bought from a Wilder Clan defect at a whopping sum). Eli memorised the tendrils of their hideout until he felt qualified enough to give a guided tour.

Also that week, with his share the cat’s milk, he ate well and bought new clothes. Eli lived for the moment.

Now dragged towards Voonder, with crocodile tears streaming down his face, Eli wondered if this was a good idea. Worst case scenario: they killed The Goon and claimed Eli for themselves. And who would miss two vagrants?

‘Come along, boy!’ said The Goon, yanking the leash. Eli fell over and grazed his knees on the floor. He got up again and scampered close to The Goon. Meanwhile, the guard at Eli’s side probed him with the butt of his spear.

Now before the throne, Eli met a goblin Warlord for the first time in his life.

Not what he was expecting. Warlord Voonder wore camo shorts, desert boots, and a black T-shirt depicting a human skull. Complete with an electric-blue Mohawk, sides buzzed to a blue stubble, he resembled a punk rocker from Polywerp. His fingernails were long and black and sharp. They made Queen Zirneklis's look like spoons. Voonder's skin was olive-green. His teeth were those of an anglerfish.

Beside him on the ground sat a boy with shaggy blonde hair and a fair complexion. He wore a mothballed T-shirt that read **Chick-Magnet**. When Eli noticed the gold-spiked purple collar cuffing the boy's neck, he realised he was staring at Voonder's lapdog.

At the other side stood another a goblin Eli presumed to be the advisor.

The torchlights crackled. It was the only sound in the hall.

Eli wondered who would speak first.

'It's an honour to meet you Warlord Voonder,' said The Goon in his ass-kissing voice. 'Thank you for allowing me an audience. You won't be disappointed with what I have to offer you.'

Voonder's crimson eyes were fixed on Eli.

Because he felt uncomfortable, Eli was late in saying: 'I wanna go home. I... wanna go home.' Normally, he faked his fear. But now he really *did* want to go home (wherever it was for the week). *Shit, what was I thinking? I'm not going to last a minute here.*

Voonder spoke, his voice harsh, metallic, like every other goblin's. But much colder. 'Let's cut to the chase...' Voonder leaned forward, eyes on Eli. Eyes always on Eli. 'How much for this boy?'

The Goon cleared his throat.

'For you, your worship, you can have him for twenty thousand polies.'

The advisor shot Voonder an alarmed look.

'Two thousand, did you say?' said the advisor.

'No,' said The Goon. 'Twenty thousand.'

They're not gonna buy this, thought Eli frantically.

‘For twenty thousand polies,’ said Voonder, ‘I can pay a family to *carve up* their son and boil him. Or I could buy a whole scout. Why the hell would I want to pay twenty thousand for *one*?’

‘Allow me to explain, your worship,’ said The Goon. ‘This boy’s name is Eli, and he comes from a very rich family in Polywerp, who own a very lucrative business in the mining industry. This boy... I’ve come to give him not as a slave, or as food, but an investment.

‘Eli’s parents will be willing to pay a huge amount to have him back. Last I checked, the reward was fifty thousand polies. You can sell him back, and earn a huge profit.’

The advisor looked dubious. He spoke Goblin into Voonder’s ear.

Flicking a hand across his Mohawk, Voonder said, ‘If this boymeat is so valuable, why don’t you ransom him yourself?’

‘Hey,’ said The Goon, raising his hands; for some reason, he kept his fedora on today. ‘I’m just a goon. A kidnapper. Besides, humans take one look at me and think they can’t trust me. Because of that, I try not to deal with them. And also, the sooner I sell, the sooner I’m able to kidnap again and repeat the process. I make money quicker that way. Pray, understand.’

‘Please, *please*,’ said Eli. ‘Make him let me go! My parent’s will be worried about me. *Please*. They’ll pay you whatever you—’

A boy appeared from a draped archway at the side of the room, his head hung low. He had a stocky body and dark hair that badly needed washed. He wore nothing but a blue loincloth emblazoned with the black letter V. Carrying a pewter tray, he stepped up to the throne, set down a goblet on the armrest, and dribbled into it a red drink.

Without clothes, the boy must’ve felt like a walking platter.

‘I’m scared,’ said Eli. That line was not in the script.

With nobody turning an eye to him, the servant boy finished pouring and left the throne room. Voonder leaned in his seat and said,

‘You have every right to fear me, Eli. I’m every boy’s worst nightmare.’

He licked his upper lip, teasing a shudder from Eli.

The advisor said something to Voonder in Goblin. The advisor then looked to The Goon and said, ‘We assume you have the necessary paper work?’

The Goon reached into his pocket. *Forget it! The whole deal’s off!* Eli wanted to shout. *I don’t want to do this anymore!* But, obviously, that would’ve made things worse. He wanted to forget revenge, forget money, forget the whole damn partnership. He’d never felt fear like this, such certainty of death.

But it was too late. The roulette ball was in motion.

Perusing the papers, the advisor said, ‘Everything looks legit. Your decision, Warlord Voonder. We have polies at hand.’

‘Before I agree...’ said Voonder. He smiled at Eli. ‘How much do you think his ransom price would drop if I ate his legs first?’

Eli’s jaw dropped. The Goon tried to speak, but tripped over his words. Only the goblins in the room seemed to receive the question without alarm.

My leg? How dare he! I like my legs!

The advisor answered him, solemnly, in Goblin.

What’s he saying? Is he talking about me?

‘Shame,’ said Voonder. ‘Let me ask my assistant.’ He looked away from Eli to his human pet. ‘Holden, is twenty thousand polies a realistic ransom price?’

Holden shifted as if his ass were numb. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘it sounds right to me. If you were to sell *me* off, Voonder, my parents would pay you the same amount. If not more.’

Voonder smiled at him as though he said something cute. His incisors gleamed.

‘Do we have a deal, Warlord Voonder?’ said The Goon.

‘Yes, yes, it’s a deal.’ Voonder signalled one guard to fetch the polies; the other grabbed the leash from The Goon.

Eli struggled, screaming.
He was faking none of it.

The best thing Eli could do was behave. He didn't want to antagonise the goblins. Judging by the way they kept eyeing him like starved tigers, they *wanted* an excuse to devour him.

He took deep breaths, telling himself, *It's okay. You've done this a million times before. It's not much different. Just stay calm, keep cool....*

The guard, a wart-riddled fat galoot (how many boys had *he* eaten?) towed Eli deeper into the lair, yanking the leash even though Eli was keeping up. According to the blueprints, the slavehold was three stories underground in the water storage floor. Torrential rain from Savage Forest would pour down a well and collect in a tank to be distributed through a complex channel of pipes. The well also provided ventilation.

Also, a hundred feet from the slavehold, the well would be his way out.

The first thing that struck Eli in the slavehold was the distinct smell of copper that reminded him of his Cavallo's old smithy. The walls were grey brick and coated in a grime patina, the wall-torches turning the dank passage into a haunt of shadows and squeaking rats. In wrought-iron cells at each side, boys in red loincloths were curled in corners, watching Eli.

Something suddenly crunched under Eli's foot. He looked down—looked back—and saw splinters of bone.

'In here, meatbag,' said the guard. He stopped at a cell with a boy already inside—a boy with messy sandy hair and a red loincloth. He sat splayed-legged in the corner. The soles of his feet were filthy.

Manacled to the wall, the boy merely watched as the guard whisked out a ring of keys, reeled open the rusted cell door, and booted Eli inside. Eli tripped over his feet and hit the ground. The

guard smacked his chops at the other boy (who cringed, drawing his legs to his face) before taking his empty dinner tray and leaving.

The door tracked shut.

‘Asshole,’ whispered Eli.

He got to his feet, patting the dirt off his knees. He surveyed his room. There was no bed, no chamber pot. Only a bench screwed to the wall.

The Goon said he would be lowering the rope one hour after the purchase.

Eli had about fifty minutes to kill.

He paced side to side, counting the second with his footsteps.

Finally, his cellmate said, ‘So what’s your story?’

Eli looked at him. The boy looked thirteen, maybe fourteen. His callow eyes sparkled in torchlight-flicker across the corridor. No cells could be viewed from here.

‘The name’s Eli. Going to be sold off tomorrow for a profit. Or so they think. You. What’s the red loincloth. All the other’s I’ve seen wore blue or white.’

‘You don’t *know*?’ said the boy, as if offended. ‘I’m wearing red because I’m due to be *eaten* tomorrow.’

‘You don’t say,’ said Eli.

‘I was caught stealing food. That was all. I was hungry and was caught stealing food, like a rat. I think...’ His voice went soft. ‘I think I have another sixteen hours left.’

‘Oh. How grizzly.’

There had been a few instances where Eli, imprisoned after his purchase, was given a cellmate, and every time Eli maintained a cold distance. He couldn’t afford—didn’t want to afford—emotional attachments for survival’s sake.

‘The blue ones you saw,’ continued the boy, ‘are Voonder’s private slaves, the white ones are “common slaves.” And there are other colours. Purple means you’re being punished. Yellow means you’re owned privately. Green means you’re up for sale.’

‘Interesting,’ said Eli. He squatted with his back to his temporary cellmate in order to study an engraving on the wall. It read, *KYEAT WAS HERE.*

‘My names Dane, by the way. Why aren’t you wearing a cloth?’

‘Because I’m being sold back to my parents,’ said Eli. ‘Well, so *they* think. The truth is, I won’t be here in an hour.’ Eli flashed his secret weapon from his boot pocket. It shone like a little dagger.

‘What’s that?’

‘Lock pick,’ said Eli, with a grin.

Dane looked at Eli, mouth ajar, as if he were a winged divinity sent to deliver a miracle. ‘Please, wherever you’re going, take me with you!’ He sprang to his filthy feet.

‘*Shh!* Can you talk any louder...? How many guards patrol this area?’

‘One comes along every half an hour to check on us—or sometimes they just come down to point and tell us the things they’re gonna do to us. But, apart from that, no one. You have to go up three flights of stairs to get out—and even then you have to pass rooms and stuff. How do you plan on not being *seen*?’

Eli snickered. ‘My partner will be lowing a rope down the well... about... forty minutes from now. It’s all a con. My partner sells me to people, claiming that they can resell me to my family at a profit. He comes and rescues me, and we start the whole process over again. Clever, huh?’

The boy looked at him as if he were mad. A genius, but mad.

‘You’re going to get yourself killed,’ said Dane.

‘Only if I’m caught,’ said Eli. He now wielded his lock pick like a knife. ‘You won’t be telling anybody, will you?’

The boy stepped back, his chain rattling. ‘No. No! Honest.’

‘Good.’

‘Please...’ He shook the shackle around his ankle. ‘You have to help me out here. I don’t wanna get eaten. I’ve a family. Brothers and sisters and a mum and dad.’

Good for you.

‘No,’ said Eli. At that one word, Dane went pale. ‘I don’t have time to babysit you.’

‘You won’t be babysitting!’ Dane dropped to his knees. ‘I’ll do anything you want. *Give you anything you want...*’

‘All you have to offer me is that red loincloth... and I’ll pass on that. If you want, I’ll let you scrape your name on that wall. But, I can’t help you. Sorry.’

He thought of The Goon’s reaction if he *did* rescued Dane—*What did I say about bringing back souvenirs?*—and barely contained a chuckle.

‘If you let me come with you,’ said Dane. ‘I’ll tell you a *secret*.’

‘Not interested,’ said Eli.

‘You *will be* in this one. Bring me with you, and I’ll tell you. I’ll then head my own way and you’ll never see me again, and I’ll never tell anyone about what you get up to—being a con-artist, an’ all—not that I care, because it’s your own business—’

‘For all I know, there *is* no secret—or just some really crap secret—and you’re just trying to make an ass of me.’

Dane had no reply.

‘Tell you what,’ said Eli. ‘Tell me whatever it is *now*, and I’ll let you come with me. But that depends on the secret—I don’t want your aunt’s recipe for pumpkin mix.’

Dane giggled. ‘Course not.’ He considered for a moment, eyes shifting in thought, then said, ‘Did you know Warlord Zarmn, the Warlord before Voonder, had a treasure?’

‘Treasure?’ said Eli.

‘Yes. Treasure.’

‘Nope. What kind of treasure?’

‘The type you’d expect: gold, rubies, emeralds... It was a secret stash he kept to himself. He told no one about it... except me.’

Convenient, Eli thought.

‘I won’t be lollygagging about this place when I escape. Even if there *was* a treasure, it’d be too heavily guarded for me to get to. Your information is useless to me.’

‘Weren’t you listening?’ said Dane. ‘It’s a *secret* stash. No one knows about it—except me and Zarmn. And Zarmn is...’ He made a slitting gesture.

‘And why would a big scary Warlord like Zarmn have a secret treasure, if he’s *head* of the damn Wilder Clan treasury?’

‘Because money goes missing all the time around here—goblins sneaking a coin here, a note there...’

‘So it’s like any government,’ said Eli.

Dane laughed. ‘Yeah, like any government. Good one. So, anyway, he kept a secret nest egg, far away. And only *I* know about it.’

Now time for the good part, Eli thought. ‘And why would the great and terrible Zarmn inform a lowly slave like yourself? Did he get drunk one night and spill the beans? Leave his diary on his bed and you had a peep at it?’

Eli sat down on the opposite corner of the cell. The banter at least helped to pass time.

‘Actually, something like that,’ said Dane. ‘He kept a map of its location in a dairy, and—’

‘The goblin tyrant kept a *diary*?’ said Eli.

‘Yeah. He did.’

Eli snorted. He imagined love-hearts and kisses galore.

‘Anyway,’ said Dane, ‘he had to tell somebody, in case he lost the map. And he showed me it.’ He tapped his temple with a finger. ‘Photographic memory. Since, I got extra protection and treated really well. I almost became a second assistant.’

Back when I coulda be’n sumbody, his tone suggested.

Eli, he had initially seen Dane’s story as a source of amusement... but it was beginning to fit into place. Didn’t most dictators underhandedly keep a back pocket full of dough for rainy

days and whores the wife never knew about? And it would only make sense to have a spare copy of the treasure map... especially one close at hand who'd never be see mummy and daddy again.

This was turning into a worthwhile chat after all.

'One more thing, though,' said Eli. 'If you knew all about this grand secret, why aren't you using it to bribe Voonderman into releasing you?'

Dane gave him a funny look. 'Would *you* trust Voonder?'

Eli didn't have to think about that one. From biographies he'd studied about Voonder, he learned how the Warlord was extradited from his own clan because of his extraordinarily violent behaviour (and going by goblin standards, that really meant something). About eight months ago, he had hatched an escape from prison, returned here, mauled Zarmn and claimed the throne. Six months later, he attempted to eat Prince Lynki during a trade negotiation with the Kyttons—who retaliated by kidnapping Voonder's personal assistant. With a rabble of followers, Voonder snuck into the Kytton Palace, took back his assistant, *beheaded* Queen Yorlandi, devoured her son, thus leading to the gradual decay of the Kytton empire.

So no. Voonder wasn't one on the Christmas card list.

'Good point,' said Eli, and just then he felt a niggle in his mind, kind of like cock crow: an hour had passed. 'Well, thanks to you my time flew in.'

He got to his feet.

'Are you releasing me?' said Dane. '*Please*, I'm not lying about the treasure! What've you and your partner got to lose?'

His partner...

In the minutes Eli dreamed of making snow-angels in Zarmn's treasure, he never once thought of The Goon.

He smiled.

'Yeah, you're right. I've nothing to lose. Let me help you with that shackle...'

Holden doubted the new boy would last the night.

He'd seen that ravenous glint in Voonder's eyes before. More often than not, the person he shared it with ended up as a midnight snack.

He'd no chance.

Holden lay curled at the foot of Voonder's bed—something he was allowed to do when Voonder was in a good mood. Voonder's room, like his throne, was spartan: a large double bed, a wooden desk, a wardrobe, a chair and a paraffin lamp. Holden had long since gotten over the fact that Zarmn's personal assistant had been slaughtered on this very bed, by Voonder.

After today's purchase, Voonder had left his throne with a bored groan to tackle a stack of paperwork, stuff to do with trade routes and importations and exportations. The Wilder Clan may have been rouge, but it contributed to the world economy like any other township. Slavery was illegal, yet an indispensable commodity.

Some things you couldn't escape.

In a few minutes, Holden fell asleep and dreamed of his family.

The dungeon was a circular tunnel. Eli moved briskly, keeping his eye on the wall for lumbering goblin shadows. Dane followed behind, his bare feet slapping the ground.

Unlike the imprisoned Kyttons, none of the boys seemed to show any interest in the escapees; apparently, they had accepted their fate... or were just afraid.

The well—according to the defect's blueprints—waited at the end of this tunnel.

So far, so good.

Before unlocking the cell, Eli told Dane not to mention Zarmn's treasure to The Goon. To explain Dane, Eli had prepared a story: Dane was an old friend of Eli's from Cavallo, and that they used to

steal food together before the Wilder Clan enslaved Dane. Later at an inn Eli planned on abandoning The Goon, with Dane, and begin the hunt for Zarmn's loot. No hard feelings. Business was business, after all.

After a minute of sneaking, they reached a rotted wooden door. Eli peeked inside.

All clear.

In the centre of the basement room was a huge waterwheel positioned over a gorge. During downpours or floods, water would crash down and spin the wheel, generating devices elsewhere in the lair. The water itself collected in a tank in the gorge.

The well loomed above the contraption, a rope hanging from it like a tongue. A rickety steel maintenance bridge along the waterwheel allowed him to reach the rope.

'Can you climb?' asked Eli.

Dane was smiling, as if in awe at the ingenious scheme. 'Yes,' he said. 'I was the best in my school before... before this.'

'Then I'll go first. I don't want to be staring at your ass.'

Eli peered up into sixty feet of near-darkness. Without any wise-cracks—in case The Goon was still sore about his pay rise—Eli jumped onto the rope. It swung a bit before Eli hit the ground on his feet, as if the rope had slackened. Startled, he looked up.

Over fifty feet of rope was plummeting towards him like long black serpent, coiling in its descent. Eli sidestepped for fear of being thwacked.

The tangled rope piled on the walkway with a *thump*, puffing a cloud up of dust.

Eli: 'What the...'

He looked up again. A sheet of paper fluttered down.

Eli snatched it. He read what it had to say.

All of a sudden, his mouth dried.

'What is it, what's happening?' said Dane.

Eli read the note twice, three times. But only the fourth time, did it sink in:

Yes.

You are too big for your boots.

Have fun with Voonder.

T.G.

The Goon walked along a narrow torch-lit trail, Savage Forest on either side of him, thick with foliage and exotic flora, darker than a cave. Twitters and chitters, growls and grumbles of dormant creatures filled the humid air. Everything nocturnal here feared firelight, so The Goon was safe from harm.

Goblins had offered to escort him, but he declined.

In a way, rigging that rope was no different than severing an umbilical cord, a cord which Eli had for too long slurped from. The Goon only felt a small sense of loss, the way a mother duck sees off her fledglings before paddling on. Eli had been a handy tool, but all tools rust, become obsolete, until they're no longer worth the hassle. And it was about time The Goon moved on, too. He had the polies for it anyway.

Perhaps back to Polywerp. Could he return to the haberdashery business he inherited from his parents? Probably not. The Polywerp Protection Plan was still under effect, effectively allowing any orc, goblin or troll to be arrested without warrant, these races declared 'at the heart of social misconduct'.

Bullshit.

Ever since being hounded out of his own home by the society he had lived amongst for years, The Goon had learned never to trust humans.

Dane: ‘What is it? What does it say? Are we in trouble?’

Eli gripped the note, his hand shaking with rage. It was Goon’s scrawl, alright. He refused to believe it. The bastard had betrayed him. He had dumped Eli—chewed him up, spat him out—and was now on the lamb with *his* share of the money. Who would’ve guessed a little confrontation over a pay rise would result in *this* treachery?

Eli regretted having asked for fifty-fifty.

He regretted ever having met The Goon.

‘He’s done a runner,’ said El, voice broken. ‘I’m gonna kill him.’

Dane cupped his hands over his face. ‘No... No... *No!* We’re gonna get *killed!*’

‘Shut up and calm down!’ said Eli. ‘I need to *think.*’

Shit. This is bad. Really, really bad.

Three possibilities whirled through Eli’s head: One, if he was caught... big deal? Dane would be barbecue, but Voonder still believed Eli was an heir to fortune; he’d be taken care of—unspoiled, hopefully—until the Wilder Clan tried to contact his parents who didn’t exist. During that time, Eli could hatch another escape. He was an orphan, a *survivor*. Slipping through the clutches of a mindless hoard of goblins shouldn’t pose too big a problem. That, of course, assumed that Voonder still planned to *sell* him....

Two, he could return to the cell, relock it, and wait for another opportunity; at least he wouldn’t be caught in an escapade, stoking the fury of his captors.

And three—

A door squeaked open. Two goblins stood at the threshold of the water room, silhouetted in torchlight. One had thinning grey hair, his

green face pruned with age. Probably a lackey. Behind him was the guard who'd booted Eli. His eyes widened, filmed with a milky cataract.

'Oh shit,' said Eli. Dane only shrieked.

The guard bellowed something in Goblin and hurried inside. The grey-haired goblin seized Dane by the hair, twisted it, and the boy yelped, buckled to his knees. Meanwhile the guard stomped towards Eli like a rampant swine.

Eli fumbled for his lock pick in his boot—the only weapon he had.

Dane was screaming, '*No! I'm sorry! Him! He made me do it!*'

Lock pick! Lock pick!

Eli glanced down at his boot and managed to prize out the instrument from the niche in his boot, but, when he looked up, the last thing he saw was the hilt of an axe coming at him like a battering ram. It struck him between the eyes.

A burst of agony. Then darkness.

Eli woke to a splitting headache. Everything was blurred, doubled: two flaming wall torches; a thousand bricks over two transitioned walls; two standing figures, shaded beyond recognition. Somewhere, below him, the rattle of halters. He looked down and saw his own body, naked, save a red loin cloth. The air was chill. His hairs stood on end.

Someone was manacled his left ankle. A fair-skinned boy with whitish blonde hair.

Eli fidgeted. Couldn't move. Rusted metal shackled his ankles, wrists and throat. He stood straight, limbs pinned, as if strapped onto a wall-mounted stretcher. He tried to breathe the air, but his noise was bunged. Blood crusted his nostrils.

His headache stabbed him like poisoned dart.

‘Looks like he’s coming around,’ said a voice somewhere ahead. It was coming from the shaded figure. Eli’s doubled vision merged. It was Voonder. Five feet away. No mistaking his scissorlike grin and hair. Like an electrified buzz-saw.

I’m trapped.

The shackler below him stood and entered his field of vision, walking daintily towards a door behind Voonder. It was an Elvin boy with pointed ears, wearing a blue loincloth. He stopped at Voonder and said. ‘I prepared him, Master Voonder.’

‘Good,’ said Voonder. ‘Now go and clean the blood in the dining room.’

With a cursory bow, the boy left.

I have to get out of here. Have to get these things off.

Eli lolled his throbbing head to the side, the ceiling. Hanging from the ceiling were meat hooks tipped with blood, chiming in an unseen draught.

This is it. I’m gonna die. Goon... you’ll pay for this.

Voonder slowly advanced, his boots scuffing the floor. He stopped three feet of Eli.

‘I found your note,’ said Voonder. ‘Something told me you weren’t a wise purchase, but I had to go and listen to *Larcomn*.’

‘Dane,’ said Eli. To his own ears, he sounded drunk.

‘Dane?’ said Voonder. ‘That boy. Your friend escaped. Two of my guards are out looking for him. He won’t last long...’ A gleaming smile. ‘If I were him, I wouldn’t want to *last* long.’

Voonder took another step. Two feet away now.

‘As far as I can see, you and that merchant tricked me. You were planning on being sold for—say, twenty thousand of my polies. You somehow unlocked one my cells. You ran to the well, where you thought that merchant would be coming to save you. You would run off with *my money*...’ Another step: one foot away now. Eli could feel Voonder’s coppery breath on his face. ‘... and repeat the process. Stop me, by the way, if I’m wrong anywhere.’

‘No. You’re not,’ said Eli. He saw no point in lying. His heart pounded.

Thud-thud thud-thud.

‘Only, things didn’t turn out the way you planned. The orc, he turned his back on you, wrote *this*’—as if from nowhere Voonder brandished the handwritten note by The Goon, holding it to Eli’s face. Suddenly, Eli felt like crying—‘and left you at my mercy.’ He read the note to himself.

‘And yes. I will have fun with you.’

Eli swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. Voonder’s saw it, and his mouth parted, as if he contemplated lunging forward and biting into it.

‘Voonder, whatever you’re planning... please don’t. I’m from a very wealthy family, that much is true. I just got hooked... hooked up... *Oh, God*, with the wrong guy. If you were to sell me, back to my family...’

Voonder threw his face in front of Eli’s. Eli suddenly became aware of his own tender, trembling belly.

‘I can see through you,’ said Voonder. ‘One piece of advice: don’t mess with me.’

He pulled away. Eli breathed deep, nearly gagging from Voonder’s rotten breath.

But, if he kept him sweet, there was still a chance of surviving.

How stupid was he to accept this heist in the *first* place?

If he had his lock pick, he could negotiate out of the shackles, beginning with one hand, then his neck, finally his other wrist and ankles. But it was in his boot, which he wasn’t wearing. It damn thing might as well have been on the moon.

Voonder, now standing five feet away from him again, turned his back to Eli. ‘For you, I see two ways out of this situation. First, you pay me my twenty thousand polies back... But I’m assuming you don’t have that. Of course, unless you’re willing to deal in pounds of flesh.’

Eli resisted a whimper.

‘Second, you give me one good reason why I shouldn’t eat you here and now. And I’m warning you: I haven’t had my dinner yet.’ Voonder’s tongue slipped from his mouth like a slimy eel sniffing for blood.

‘I’ve got a good reason why you shouldn’t harm me, Warlord Voonder.’

An amused, deadly grin. ‘Really? What would that be?’

And three—

‘I know where a secret treasure is. With it, you’ll be able to make a hell of a lot more than twenty thousand polies.’

‘Secret treasure? What treasure?’ He looked genuinely curious.

‘It’s Lord Zarmn’s hidden treasure. One that he’d been hoarding under your nose. Nobody knows about it, except *me*.’ Eli didn’t want to reveal the source of this information, because Voonder would have been at liberty to kill him if the guards returned with Dane.

‘Except *you*,’ said Voonder. ‘How you know such a thing?’

‘Me and The Goon—that’s my partner’s name, *The Goon*—we were planning on finding the treasure, which he buried somewhere far from here. We hear rumours all the time from different people, and we were going to check it out. But if you release me, I’ll show where it’s hidden. And you can have it. All of it.’

Voonder laughed, a harsh grating sound. He paced side-to-side. ‘I’ve heard of this treasure. Old Zarmn was fond of secrets, keeping things under wraps.

‘I’ll make you a deal, Eli: you tell me where the treasure is now, and I’ll set you free. Gob Scouts honour.’ He crossed the place where a heart might have been.

Eli smiled. ‘I may be boymeat, but I’m not stupid. Let me go, and I’ll lead one of your minions to the treasure. That’s the deal.’

Amazingly, Eli felt *authority* course through his veins again—the same exhilaration when he got from confronting The Goon.

Perfectly immobile, unable to defend himself, words were his only shield.

Earlier, while unlocking his shackle, Dane had told Eli one piece of information: that Voonder had sold Zarmn's diary to a slave-hunter in Cavallo going by the name 'Boss Coyote'. If it weren't for this knowledge, everything Eli said would've been a huge bluff.

He was going to play Voonder one move at a time.

'And what if this "rumour" is wrong. What if there is no treasure, or just not where you say it will be?'

'Well... you're taking a risk, aren't you? But you're not averse to risks. Face it, you bought *me*.'

Voonder looked at Eli for a very long time. Eli wondered what blood-smattered thoughts were occurring in the black pit of his mind.

Before Eli could open his mouth again, Voonder lunged forward and seized him by the hair. Leaning into his face, the goblin said, 'Okay. I'll agree to your terms. But you better not be lying. And just to make sure of it, I'll be coming with you.'

A quarter-mile from the Wilder Clan, surrounded but safe from the monstrosities of Savage Forest, swatting gnats from his face, The Goon got thinking about his family.

His wife had been a customer at the family haberdashery stall in the market district of Polywerp. Halfcast, she inherited the looks of an orc but the lithely elegance of an elf. Beautiful. It was love at first sight. Within two years of dating, they got married, bought a home in the better part of the slums, had a kid. Most humans never considered the namby-pamby aspects of an orc. Being a distant cousin to goblins, it was assumed orcs lived a sexless life, waging riots and starting fights, and that orklings just sprouted from holes in the ground.

Some orcs chose to obey their primeval instincts, leading lives more befitting to rouge goblin clans. Many, however, lived ordinary

lives. Orcs were nobles, traders, fathers and lovers. They could cry if provoked. They bled when they were stabbed.

The Goon knew this all too well.

After the implementation of the Polywerp Protection Plan, which targeted orcs and other societal outcasts, imposing outrageous curfews and stripping them of rights, a group of thirty-something orcs marched in the warehouse district of Polywerp. It was to be a peaceful protest. Banners were held up (proclaiming ‘**Orc Power**’) with invigorating chants blaring the streets. The Goon was there, with his wife and child. She had always been one for equality and civil rights.

The plan was to demonstrate for a few hours before heading home. They were to meet again the next day, and the day after, until the act was lifted.

But there is always one to break the peace...

A single orc, who had been drinking during the protest, chucked a rock through a pedestrian’s window. An elf peeked out and slandered at the protesting crowd. Passers-by joined in. It became a verbal free-for-all.

Soon it all turned too violent.

City guards were brought in to quell the riot. Some orcs, in the heat of things, struck back with rocks and makeshift arms. The Goon’s wife, loving and caring as ever, tended to an elderly orc who had sustained a bloody blow to the head.

The Goon remembered the scene clearly; he’d never forget it: His wife, knelt down. The guard behind her, turning around amidst the chaos. Seeing her. The manic glint in his eye as he raised his spear, and plunged it into her back.

The Goon never found out the reason for the his wife’s unprovoked murder, but the guard claimed he acted in self-defence. Bullshit. He was a mobster in armour, no different than the orc who’d cast the first stone.

In his rush to help his bleeding wife, The Goon lost track of their child in the horrified stampede. His wife, pierced through the heart, died in his arms.

Later, he found his child: broken, trampled to death in the street.

Two others died that day: one guard, and the elderly orc his wife had helped.

But for The Goon, the nightmare wasn't over. The Polywerp authorities were searching for the protestors of that day. The Goon took to hiding in his parent's loft. A few days later, the family haberdashery—generations of livelihood—had been burned to the ground, diminished to ash.

Suffering enough, The Goon abandoned Polywerp, the family business and his life history for a covert life of crime. He no longer saw the need to serve society when it had actively sought to destroy him.

Thinking about his past and how things should've been, The Goon swelled with rage. He walked with his nails digging into his palms, biting his bottom lip hard enough to draw blood. In real life, the good innocent guys never succeeded. There were no happy endings.

He doubted he'd ever live to see the day when orcs and other races lived in harmony as equals.

An orc as a lord... that was a funny thought.

Better chance of Eli escaping the Wilder—

The Goon broke from this train of thought at the sound of quick, light footsteps behind him. Around a bend, a boy was looking behind him as he ran, his red loincloth flapping like a flag. It wasn't like goblins to suddenly let loose one of their captives.

The boy bumped into The Goon.

A featherweight compared to the orc, he hit the ground on his butt and looked up, his panic-stricken eyes glistening with tears in the firelight.

More hurried footsteps in the distance. The clank of armour.

Immediately aware of the situation, The Goon nodded to the side of the road. The boy sprang to his feet, ducked the wooden barrier separating the woods from the trail, vaulted over a thick tree stump and ducked behind it. He would be safe there for a short while, assuming no beasts were in the vicinity.

Two goblins wearing rusted armour appeared from the bend. One was fat and had big jowls, wheezing as if in a marathon. The other was skinny with a thin, ratty face, in considerably better shape. They saw The Goon and stopped. The fat one asked in whooping breaths, ‘You... seen...’ *Whoop!* ‘A kid ‘round here? He... looks like —’

‘He doesn’t need to know what he looks like!’ snapped Skinny. ‘How many kids have you seen playing around in *Savage Forest*?’

‘Well...’ *Whoop!* ‘Have you...?’

The Goon gave them a bum tip. Pointing, he told them that he’d seen a boy cutting across the forest, like a flasher in the dark.

‘Aw, shite,’ said Fatty.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Skinny. ‘He’ll be dead anyway.’

The goblins, without goodbyes, turned and walked back.

‘I know... but...’ *Whoop!* ‘How are we gonna explain this the Warlord...?’

‘It’s your fault... if you’d lose some damn weight...’

‘I’m tryin’... It’s just... can’t resist...’

The voices and footsteps faded. The Goon patiently waited a minute until the boy peeked over the tree stump. Seeing the coast was clear, he skittered up to The Goon.

‘Thank you, sir,’ he said in a low, breathy voice, trembling like a cat that’d been chased by a dog. He ran a shaky hand through his hair. ‘I escaped the Wilder Clan. They were going to eat me. I... I can’t believe it. I’m free. I’m finally *free*... And it’s thanks to you, good sir. I wish... I wish there was some way I could repay you...’

‘You got any money?’ asked The Goon.

The boy looked taken aback by his forwardness. He then—The Goon smirked at this—reached along his thighs into phantom-itch pockets. Realising the blunder, the boy rubbed his arm.

‘Uh... I’m afraid I don’t,’ he said. ‘The clan, they took everything from me. I haven’t got anything. But my parents are sure to reward you. Could you please take me to them? They live in Port Aardvark. I haven’t seen them in three years. Ha! Can you imagine?’

‘What do you parents do?’ asked The Goon.

‘My parents? Uh... my dad is a fisherman and my mum sweeps the stables at the royal family’s house.’

Poor, in other words.

‘Not interested,’ said The Goon. He turned to walk off.

‘No—wait—please!’ The boy ran in front of him. ‘You have to take me to them! I’ve nothing to live on, and it’s days away! Please, I’m begging you! If you do... I’ll... tell you a *secret*.’

‘I don’t like secrets,’ said The Goon.

‘You’ll love this one,’ said the boy. ‘It’s about Warlord Zarmn’s hidden treasure. He was the ruler of the Wilder Clan before Voonder took over. I know *where it is*! If you take me home, back to my family, I’ll tell you everything. Everything! And it’ll be all yours. Please... I have to see my family again. It’s been...’ He started crying. ‘Too damn long...’

Great. Here’s the waterworks.

Vaguely interested in the bullshit the boy had to spew, The Goon said, ‘You tell me now, and I’ll take you back to Aadvark. I promise.’

The boy looked at him unsurely, no doubt deterred by his sinister eyes, fedora-shaded face, and that fact that he was an orc. But he nodded, agreeing to himself.

He told The Goon everything.

The Goon listened with mild curiosity... then with interest, amazed by the richness of detail: the treasure’s bearings, its accumulation, how the boy came to know about it. At first, The Goon

believed that the boy only had to offer a treasure map to kid's pocket money.

However, if what the boy was telling him was true...

He had hit the mother lode.

And to think, he'd considered offering the boy on a plate to the goblins, just out of badness. Good karma resulted from good deeds, it seemed.

Five minutes later: 'That's everything I know. Now, please, will you take me to Aadvark?'

The Goon smiled. 'Thanks, kid.'

He took a coil of frayed rope from his coat pocket—it was the one he severed from Eli—and secured one end to a post. The rope measured about ten feet. The boy simply watched. The Goon then knelt down and quickly tied the other end to the boy's ankle. 'Hey, what're you *doing?*'. The boy tried to kick it off, but The Goon had fastened it smart.

'Pleasure doing business with you,' said The Goon.

The boy kicked against the rope, but the post was bedded deep. The boy knelt, tried to pry the knot loose... but The Goon made good knots. He had months of experience from his fun escapades with Eli.

'This is a joke,' said the boy.

Content that the human wouldn't be going anywhere—until found by goblins or devoured by the forest for breakfast—The Goon turned and walked away.

'Hey! *Hey!* Get back here!' The post creaked. The boy's voice sounded closer. '*You son of a bitch! We had a deal! You promised!*' Creak, creak. '*This isn't FAIR!*'

Life's not fair, thought The Goon, and he walked on.

Chapter 4

The Brat and the Unruly

Cavallo is a coastal city. Population: sixty thousand. Intersected by the country's largest trade route, it links western cities such as Polywerp with eastern cities such as Firehawk. As a result, Cavallo is a bustle of commerce, boasting a range of foreign merchandise.

However, being central on the map, flanked by allies and foes, it is often the target of raids from goblin marauders. The Wilder Clan residing fifty miles to the north, across Shark River, youngsters are occasionally snatched from the city as slaves, their parents sometimes murdered in the process. Therefore, Cavallo soldiers guard traders and patrol the city on a twenty-four hour basis.

Voonder has been to Cavallo many times before.

He is unsure whether he trusts this boy, Eli. But one thing is for certain: the boy has gall. To deceive the Wilder Clan, rob them of money and sneak off like a mouse, requires courage of hearty proportions. And when captured, the boy hadn't pleaded—but *bargained* for his life; whereas other captives quake before Voonder's presence, urine trickling down their legs.

He likes Eli. The boy is interesting.

Cavallo is only six hours journey away, and Voonder wants to waste no time. After the deal with Eli, Voonder had ordered a carriage to be readied within the hour, and Eli's clothes to be returned; no point in making it blatant that the Clan dabbles in the slave trade.

Voonder's face is well known. Because of this, he also wears a black cowl.

The treasure, however, is not in Cavallo. According to Eli, a slave-hunter obtained Zarmn's diary during the cull of the old Warlord's belongings. They fetched a pretty price, Voonder recalls. Unfortunately, he didn't know at the time that the diary contained the location of a secret hoard. Had he known, Voonder would've reaped it long ago.

Eli keeps the name of the hunter to himself: collateral should Voonder betray him.

Clever boy.

Torture would not have extracted the information; Voonder knows squealers when he saw them. And fifteen-year-old Eli isn't a squealer.

All in all, the detour doesn't bother Voonder. Rather, he enjoys it.

He and Eli sit in the rocking carriage driven by one of his guards, masquerading as a merchant wagon delivering iron ore.

Voonder has many enemies. He doesn't need his presence advertised.

Outside, Savage Forest behind them, grassy plains roll into the moonlit horizon. Stars twinkle like ice chips, melting west towards the smog of industrial cities. At this late hour, very few travel along the roads, their day's work already completed.

Aside from the gentle rocking, the occasional snort of a horse, it is silent.

Eli sits facing Voonder. He looks on edge, knees drawn together, hands on his lap. Voonder occasionally catches him stealing glances between him and the carriage window.

Voonder wonders what he tastes like. He wonders how the boy would react if he suddenly decided to forget the treasure and tuck into dinner.

He hears the boy's heart beating like hooves, the blood gushing through his veins. You can learn a lot about a human in their dying moments, if they are noble or wretched, brave or cowardly....

Involuntary twitches of muscle betray the boy's bravery. He licks his lips often. Voonder does too. Voonder's appetite is like a starving beast on a frayed tether, in smelling distance of a steak. But he resists. He is curious to see how this event unfolds.

Voonder sits, breathing the boy's salty fear.

It is a long journey to Cavallo.

The six or so hours in the carriage were the longest of Eli's life.

He kept a brave face, staring out the window, watching the world roll slowly by. He dared not sneak too many glimpses of the goblin Warlord; although of similar stature, he had teeth that could render metal.

Voonder had been quiet the entire trip as if engrossed in a daydream. But Eli had that inkling that, Voonder was dying to throw himself at Eli and turn the carriage into a slaughterhouse.

Although Eli had plenty of practice passing the time in confinement—waiting for The Goon to literally throw him a lifeline—these six hours with Voonder were excruciating.

The carriage suddenly stopped at a gatekeeper, who checked writs of entry in Cavallo. It had been the same since Eli was a boy. However, a few scoundrels always managed to slip through the barrier to reign children into slavery.

Eli knew. It had happened to some of his friends.

To an extent, it was happening now.

He heard a few agreeable grumbles as the carriage entered Cavallo. Tingling with nostalgia, he watched his old neighbourhood pass him: The stalls now cleared out for the night; broken bric-a-brac littering the paved ground; the small houses, their windows aglow; working-class men de-weeding their front gardens. And deeper into the city they passed his old orphanage—a derelict shack of a place, where he'd grown up for a year before bumping into The Goon.

Nothing had changed.

During this time, Eli wondered what The Goon was up to. He was probably squandering his riches in Polywerp, kipping in expensive hotels with sleazy orc hookers, gambling in casinos and drinking late into the night.

Eli hoped to meet him one day, and deliver a message: a knife to his throat.

As far as The Goon knew, Eli had been loyal to him. They had planned heists together, ate their meals together, bickered with one

another, slept in the same rooms. (although any attempts to get to know the orc were met with surly grunts). Upon a time, Eli had looked up to The Goon. Because he was an outcast, a survivor...

And he'd chucked Eli as if he were a dud explosive.

Eli was a survivor, too. His wheedling with Voonder proved it. He suffered enough shit in his life—and he wasn't going out of this world by way of a goblin's stomach.

The carriage trotted another corner, heading through the warehouse district and its large brick storehouses where merchants parked their wares for the night.

Voonder remained suspiciously quiet. Every so often, it occurred to Eli that Voonder might have set a trap—that goblins would be waiting for him when he stepped out of the carriage, eager to shred the slave-hunter's name out of him.

He pushed this thought away. If Voonder *really* wanted to, he could've bled the info from him back in that torture room. But, for some reason, Voonder chose to come along with him. Alone. No squadron or reinforcements.

Eli thought it strange. Strange and ominous.

While he planned to get even with The Goon—no matter how long it took; no doubt about it—was he capable of exacting revenge on Voonder? Voonder wasn't Warlord at the time of his parents' death, and had no role to play in it. But he was a member of the same organisation, the same wild sovereignty, and someone had to answer for it...

I'll get you Voonder. Yeah, I bet you can hear me think, but I'm gonna get you. You better watch your back. Nobody crosses me and gets away with it.

The carriage halted, and the rider—a humpback goblin in tatty clothes—opened the door and let Voonder and Eli out. Cavallo air smelt like it always had: tobacco and horse manure.

Home, sweet home.

Voonder blathered in Goblin with the rider who nodded agreeably as he spoke, nervily bending his knees in half-curtsies. With a grunt (or it might've been a Goblin word) he clambered back to the reins, giddied-up the horses and clopped off, watching Eli with a surreptitious eye.

'Igor is off to find stables,' said Voonder. 'Meanwhile, what do you say we stay at an inn, eh, Eli?' His eyes flickered in the shade of his cowl.

While the thought of sharing a room with Voonder made Eli cringe, the goblin had a point. Wherever Boss Coyote was, he wouldn't be trading at this hour. Besides, retrieving the diary gave Voonder an excuse to dispose of Eli.

It was best to wait until the morning, when he was refreshed and energetic and more able to manage Voonder.

He'd just have to make sure to get his own room.

'Okay,' said Eli. 'I know a good inn where we can stay, called the Wild Boar. It's—'

'I know where it is, boymeat,' said Voonder. He savoured Eli with his eyes. Then he said with a cheeky grin: 'Come on. It's almost dinner time.'

Given the circumstances, Eli almost found that quite funny.

He followed Voonder, keeping three feet from his side, walking through the deserted market street, gazing with reminiscence the dark alleys he used to explore as a kid.

There was no point in running from Voonder—goblins were far more agile than humans. Voonder could catch up with ease... and pounce.

The best time to make his exit would be at the inn, in the midst of the night.

However, that plan left him without Zarmn's diary. And there couldn't have been many slave hunters in Cavallo; Voonder would just have to patiently ask around until he found Boss Coyote, bought the map, and reaped the gold at the end of the rainbow....

As they turned a poorly lit corner, a homeless guy, maybe about seventeen with tatted hair and bum-fluff, barechested and barefooted, spotted Voonder and Eli. He came up to them spiderlike and began pestering for money.

‘Please, good sirs, could you spare a polie?’

Voonder and Eli ignored him.

With regards to the treasure... Eli didn’t know what to. Right now, food and sleep were on his mind; he hadn’t eaten anything since dinner before the Wilder Clan heist, and the long trip to Cavallo left him feeling groggy. He couldn’t think straight...

And the babbling of that homeless bum wasn’t helping.

‘Sirs? Please can you spare a polie for a starving orphan? Please?’

Eli rolled his eyes. He knew how tough it was on the streets, and living life without a parents was lonesome. As an orphan himself, he *knew*. But he hated beggars. They were cowardly, lazy, with a passive role in life. Instead of taking a risk, picking pockets and stealing bread, they chose to rely on the limited generosity of others.

‘Sirs? I haven’t eaten anything...’

Besides, most of them spent it on drink or weed anyway. Eli dully considered if this orphan had lost his parents to the Wilder Clan too. Homeless, potless, he was the type of lad goblins clonked over the head, stuffed into a sack, and smuggled as slaves or grub.

‘Please, sirs...’

Eli sighed. He was ready to dip his hands into his pockets and give the orphan a spare polie when Voonder spun round and battened on the homeless boy’s neck. It happened so fast Eli didn’t know what was going on, not until he saw the boy’s pain-struck face and Voonder buried into the nook of his shoulder, the hood of his cowl blown back, revealing the pendulum blade of electric hair.

Eli watched, frozen. The orphan opened his mouth to scream but Voonder gagged him with his fist. Blood spilled down the boy’s bare

torso. Voonder lured him flat to the ground. The boy grabbed at Voonder's shoulder and tried to pull him off.

'Voonder—!' started Eli.

Suddenly Voonder ripped a chunk from the boy's neck in a spray of blood and tendons. Blood jetted from the boy like a fountain, his screams muffled by Voonder's fist, the wrist now rimmed with blood. The boy's legs kicked the ground convulsively, as if he were suffering a seizure.

His face turned a dark purple.

'Voonder...' said Eli. He turned away.

He heard something else rip: the sound of pulled meat. Leaning against a wall, Eli cupped a hand over his mouth. Cold sweat leaked from his brow.

'Voonder...'

Squelching. Gnashing. Chewing. Gurgled breathing. Legs beating, softly now.

'V-Voonder...'

Eli felt cold. Faint. Like he were floating.

'Voonder, stop,' he said. He forced himself to turn around. The boy looked like an eviscerated lasagne—with mothballed trousers and spread limbs. Voonder was feasting where he'd previously chewed open the boy's carotid artery.

'V-V-Voonder...'

Hearing Eli's voice, Voonder shot his head up. His eyes like white sconces in the bloody mask of his face. A flap of the boy's cheek bled from his mouth like a fleshy wedge. In that instant—before he turned away again—Eli saw the wild *thing* that Voonder was: A ravenous demon, its primeval brutality restrained only by weak chains. And inside those eyes, the glint of madness.

This was the creature that inhabited the nightmares of every child.

'Stop it,' said Eli into his palm. He leaned against the wall on his shoulder.

After an audible gulp, Voonder said, ‘Told you. I didn’t have my dinner yet.’

You sick bastard.

‘What do you think you’re *doing*? You’re gonna get us in ... trouble.’

‘Relax. I’m done now, anyway. ... Are you coming?’

Eli dared not succumb to the faintness; he imagined he’d never wake up again.

‘Are you *insane*?’ he cried. ‘We can’t just leave... him here.’

‘Well what do you want me to do?’

‘... Put him... put him in the sewer. Holes. There should be a manhole somewhere...’

A minute later he heard the clang of an de-lidded sewer. The next instant: the sound of a dragged body, and the plop of water. *So that’s what throwing a dead body into a river sounds like*, Eli thought insanely.

‘Happy?’ said Voonder.

Half in reality, half in dream, Eli looked around and saw Voonder rinsing his face with a camel skin pouch he’d kept under his cowl. He then splashed the blood-smearred ground, diluting the blood in a blossom.

‘What are you gonna do about all that blood?’ said Eli.

‘Nothing. It’s past midnight. Nobody will see this until the morning.’

‘There’s guards about. *They* might spot it.’

Voonder stowed his flask back under his cowl. He cloaked himself.

‘How’s this gonna be explained?’ said Eli.

‘Accidents happen.’ Voonder grinned. It was the grin a piranha after a big feed.

Eli’s stomach lurched.

‘Let’s go,’ said Voonder. He stretched and yawned. ‘I always need a nap after feeding.’

'Holden... Holden.'

Holden fidgeted against the waking hand on his shoulder. He pulled the warm blankets back over him. Why couldn't they have made school later in the day? Then everyone would get a good lie-in.

The hand insisted. 'Holden. Wake up.'

Eyes opened to a chink, he rolled over and saw an effeminate bare-chested boy with silvery blonde hair and pointed ears leaning over him. Zsider, the elf. Beside him stood Max, a stocky boy about the same age with thick brown hair. Both were dressed in a blue loincloth.

Depression washed over Holden: *Good morning. Let the horror begin.*

'You missed Voonder,' said Zsider in his calm and wise voice.

'Missed him?' said Holden. He yawned, stretched. He had a crick in his neck because of his damn collar. 'I don't recall ever missing him.'

'You know what I mean,' said Zsider. 'He's gone off to Cavallo with that boy sold earlier. Eli.'

Holden noticed that, at some point during his sleep, he had snuggled under Voonder's sheets. That was something would've been beaten for.

'Good,' he said. 'Maybe we can get a break.' Holden threw his head back onto the pillow. It was the first good sleep he had in ages, and he'd be damned if he was going to be interrupted from it.

Another hand pulled him. Max, this time.

'That's why we're waking you,' he said in a brusque voice. He eyebrows were knitted in concern. 'I don't think we *will* be catching a break.'

'Voonder appointed Rawrs as substitute to the throne,' said Zsider. 'Which means it's going to be his rules for a while.'

Rawrs, a fiery-haired goblin with patriotic zeal, was Voonder's best friend. After Zarmn's death, Voonder enlisted him as general of the Wilder Clan army. He was malicious and dunderheaded (a bad combo), ruling his soldiers with a whip of barbed wire.

Holden sat up in bed. This couldn't have been good news.

'He's going... haywire, to say the least,' said Max. 'He'd a bloody banquet a minute ago with some of the *commoners*.' This was the term for common slaves, who belonged to the general Wilder Clan population. They wore white loincloths.

'Voonder's not going to like that,' said Holden. Voonder rarely touched the Wilder Clan's stock of slaves, preferring to order in fresh, or to confiscate private slaves from elite clan members. Obviously, this made him unpopular with the *upper-middle class* (who were goblins that chose business over butchery).

'You're damn right he's not,' said Max.

'Until Voonder gets back,' said Zsider, 'I think this means that nobody will be safe.' He looked down at his blue loincloth which, until today, had safeguarded him.

Holden's hand crept up to his collar. Voonder treated him like crap; he taunted him, hit him, made him perform menial chores, had him sleep rough and fed him sparingly. However, he'd taken for granted the status of *personal assistant*, and the fringe benefits it came with. Namely, immunity.

Ironic. Without Voonder, he felt vulnerable.

'Surely, they can't do that,' said Holden. 'They can't harm *our* class.'

'That's what Darryl said,' said Max solemnly. 'And they're roasting him on a spit.'

Holden's heart jogged—he'd woken up from a pleasant dream in which he was surrounded by family, and into a nightmare where his already sparse rights had been scrapped.

He suddenly found it hard to breath. He tugged at his collar.

'This isn't good, guys.'

Eli lay awake in bed.

He couldn't sleep, dazed after witnessing that orphan's execution.

He wondered what his name had been.

It didn't matter.

The Wild Boar had one room left. A twin room. Which meant that Voonder was now *five feet away from him*, cuddled up in bed, his back to Eli.

Eli didn't *dare* sleep.

It had been an hour since Voonder turned in. Eli heard no soft snoring. Was he still awake? Was he waiting for Eli to make his exit?

Eli had undressed, placing his clothes within reach. Just in case.

Silence filled the room.

No screams or shouts outside. Nobody had discovered the blood.

What would they think? Tomato juice? Red dye? A squashed cat?

If Eli snuck out of them room now, he'd be forfeiting his only chance to pull himself out of the rathole of poverty, and Voonder—Eli's newly appointed arch nemesis—would claim Zarmn's bounty for himself and his mindless ginks..

The blood... so much blood...

Stick it out, he told himself. Voonder was just one goblin, a shrimp with scissor teeth and bad breath.

... But how did the maniac strike such *terror* in him?

Eli thought of The Goon. The Goon had done this. The Goon had started it all.

Eli hated The Goon.

He'd tricked him, left him alone. To be devoured by Voonder.

Eli hated Voonder.

Now Voonder stood between him and the prosperity he had dreamed of.

Eli hated this situation.

Keeping his eyes wide as saucers, not daring to sleep, he clutched the blanket closer to himself and allowed his mind to escape into how things should've been.

The Goon, The Brat, and The Unruly

Part II

For Wunderkind

Prologue

Tied to a post, face glazed with tears, Dane listened to the groans of Savage Forest.

He didn't know how long he'd been like this—moored like an abandoned dog. No goblins had yet done a round to refuel the torchlights, but for the last six hours—or what Dane *guessed* were six hours—he'd been keeping the torch closest to him alive by plucking grass, small twigs, feeding them to the flame.

Light was his barrier to the monsters of the forest.

He sat, knees drawn, toes curled into the soil, cowered within the mote of wan light. He'd tried to pry loose the knot of the rope binding his ankle, but was rewarded with stiff, aching fingers and flaked skin. He'd also tried to rip the post (where the other end of the rope was attached) from the ground, but his skinny arms only quaked with effort. He'd given up. The ground around him was plucked dry, so he had nothing left to keep the torch alive, and he dared not reach out beyond the light, into the dark, where he imagined something would ravage his flesh like a piranha, leaving nothing but a bloody stump where his hand should've been.

He heard them, the beasts: snarling. Prowling. Cracking leaves beneath their feet. Things slithered, too, hissing and skittering; everything waiting for that light to go out—now a dying ember. Every so often, Dane caught a glimpse of fangs or the sightless eyes of a creature lurking beyond the curtain of darkness. Dane, he had done a lot of crying. The air was thick, humid, and sweat to crawled down his bare skin. These man-eaters had picked up his scent, and were now salivating at the prospect of a salted meal.

He had only one option: scream, hoping for one of the Wilder Clan goblins to recapture him. But he didn't know if that was *worse*. Either way, his death would be cruel. Pieces of him ending up in the belly of one thing or another.

Dane drew his knees closer. He looked at the torch. He had only minutes to live.

And to think, only—what, six hours ago?—he had been saved from the Wilder Clan dungeon like a caged animal set free, thanks to his cellmate, Eli. Eli was a boy around his age who had been sold to the Wilder Clan by his con-artist buddy. However, it was a hoax. An hour later, that same partner would lower a rope into the Wilder Clan's well, and Eli, an expert lock-picker, would escape and live to split the dough.

He'd had planned to escape alone and abandon Dane, who had been imprisoned for stealing food, thus The Wilder Clan had ruled the become food himself. (The goblins even went as far to plan the menu for that night: Roasted Dane with Mashed Potatoes and Gravy, washed down with his own Blood.)

So Dane struck a deal: He told Eli that Zarmn, the late Wilder Clan Warlord, had hoarded a personal treasure. *Where* it was hoarded Dane would tell him once he was free. And so Eli took Dane with him on his escapade. But when they had reached the well—their escape route—they discovered a rigged rope—it came tumbling down, with a note. Dane didn't get a chance to read it before the goblins found them, bludgeoned Eli and sent Dane running for his life, but judging from Eli's moist eyes and trembling hands, his partner had betrayed him, and rode off with all the loot. And now—

Something nipped Dane's toes. The torch had waned to a blood-diamond wink, and the darkness had crept over his feet. Dane shirked back. A bug chittered in protest. Somewhere, a creature howled, signalling that food was near ready; and another answered its call. It seemed as if every carnivore on the planet had gathered at the one dinner table.

Hugging his legs, Dane started crying. 'I *hate* you. I *hate* you.' He was talking about Voonder, the existing Wilder Clan Warlord.

Voonder... the leader of the clan who kidnapped him.

Voonder... who had taken Dane and so many other boys from their families, never to see them again except as smiling faces in an obituary. It shouldn't have to be like this, not for a thirteen-year-old

with his whole life ahead of him. He had yet to kiss a girl. Find his best friend. Become what he wanted to be...

Dane cried hard now, tears scalding his face and running down his cheeks like a marinade for every depraved creature that—

The torch diminished to a wisp, and all went black. Dane didn't have a chance to scream before something foetid and hairy lunged forward and sank its teeth into his throat.

Chapter 5
The Brat and The Unruly (Continued)

The innkeeper, a burly, bearded man, led them into the cellar. Eli kept two steps behind him. And close behind Eli was Voonder. He had gestured Eli to go in front, so that he'd have nowhere to run. The air smelled of damp wood and mould, as if the place was recently flooded. A typical place for a slave-hunter like Boss Coyote, Eli thought. Soon they'd probably come to a basement of hay-floored cages containing barefoot orphans.

At dawn, before breakfast, Voonder had shaken Eli awake and went with him to the innkeeper's office. It took five hundred polies and proof of Voonder's lordship over the Wilder Clan in order coax out Boss Coyote's location. Serendipitously, he operated in the converted cellar of the very inn they were staying at. Today, however, he was out of town on business, leaving his apprentice, Sub Hyena, in charge.

Voonder wore his black cowl, to hide the fact that he was a goblin Warlord, the most loathed of all creatures in existence.

Eli did not sleep last night. He'd been listening for screams. But heard none. Clearly, Voonder's slapdash attempt to 'wash up after dinner' rinsed off all evidence of the murder last night—and nobody would miss a street orphan.

It were men like Coyote and his apprentice who thrived on Cavallo's epidemic of parentless children, welcoming them into his bosom, providing them shelter... under the condition that they were slapped with a price tag, available to any noble, goblin or weirdo that happened to walk through his doors.

During his own time on the streets, Eli was not once tempted to pawn himself to Coyote. He would've sooner withered in a gutter.

Eli stumbled on a corner step—spacial awareness lost to exhaustion—and caught his balance on the handrail. 'Careful!' the innkeeper said, sounding more impatient than concerned.

The descent into a dark cellar, playing hostage ... it took him back to when was with The Goon. But there was no nostalgia, only contempt. The Goon was going to pay for his treachery. Last night,

Eli had dreamt up plots—a bomb letter, a hired killer. Or even better, hunt down The Goon, pretend to forgive him ... then blow him to smithereens with his own blunderbuss. Then *he* would know what it was like to be backstabbed by someone you trusted.

But first, he had to do something about Voonder. If the existence of Zarmn's dairy turned out to be bogus—if Dane had given him false information—he would dispose of Eli as he did that street orphan, eating his fill and dumping him in a sewer somewhere. Even if he *did* obtain the diary, Voonder would probably dispose of him anyway. He didn't trust Voonder to set him free. From recent experience, he learned never to trust anyone.

If only Voonder had entered the cellar first, then he could've snuck up on him, hands outstretched ... and push—whoopsadaisy!—and watch him tumble down the narrow steps, smashing teeth and snapping bones along the way. Then while the innkeeper was off getting help, Eli would stare over Voonder's broken body and laugh, before, ceremoniously, kneeling down and slitting the little green bastard's throat...

Two asses he had to kick: that two-faced, blunderbuss-wielding, fedora-wearing orc he thought was his friend; and Voonder, the leader of the Wilder Clan. The clan that slaughtered Eli's parents when he was but a starry-eyed eleven-year-old.

They reached the foot of the stairs, cramped onto a patch of flat ground. The innkeeper stank of stale BO, and Voonder's warm breath tickled the back of his neck.

'Not long now, Elicious,' said Voonder, with a low rasping chuckle that almost made Eli shudder.

The innkeeper pulled out a ring of keys and took forever to find the right one. He opened a wooden door and led them into a bright room.

So this is it, thought Eli. This is how the bastard lives off the misery of orphans.

It wasn't a basement lined with cages. It was an underground *apartment*. The enormous room was painted white, decorated with what looked like expensive furniture. In the centre, on what looked like an expensive exotic rug, were two leather recliners facing a burnished two-tier coffee table, which sheened under the light of a gold electric chandelier. Paintings that looked like childish scribbles—abstracts from a Polywerp gallery—hung on every wall.

Slouched back in one of the recliners, was a man, an arm on each rest, and dressed in a white bathrobe. It was impossible to tell his age; he hid his face behind a black turban, with a parting for his eyes. *Three asses I have to kick now*, thought Eli. At his side stood a teenage Kytton. Eli could tell she was a teenager by her stubby whiskers and her short, fuzzy ears. She wore what looked like a hotel concierge's uniform and a fake, 'please fly with us again' smile on her feline face. She balanced on a silver tray on which were two fizzing champagne flutes.

'Here're your guests, Sub,' said the innkeeper with a tip of his head. He left, locking the door behind him.

Sub Hyena leaned in his seat. 'It's a pleasure to do business with the Wilder Clan again.' His voice was deep, muffled under his turban, a middle-aged man's voice. 'Still, I would've appreciated a little notice, given the state I'm in...'

Voonder rolled back his hood, and out sprang his blue Mohawk (or his *cockatoo hairdo*, Eli called it) in perfect points. His skin was a bright shade of green in the artificial light, like the flesh of an avocado.

Hyena's eyes widened when he saw he was no longer dealing with a Wilder Clan minion, but the king himself. 'Oh! Warlord Voonder!' He sprang from his seat and adopted posture of servility. 'Sorry, I didn't know it was you! If I had, I would've made more of an effort!' He said to his young bellhop, pointing to the champagne

flutes, ‘Naxia! What are you doing with that horse piss! Get the good stuff! And be quick, for crying out loud!’

While Hyena fussed over Voonder like an excited dog, Eli noticed a different reaction in the bellhop. Her catlike pupils narrowed, as if she’d been blasted with light. Her ears pinned back to her head and her jaw dropped slightly, revealing the blunt tips of her canines. *She’s like a kitten, Eli thought, when a pit-bull walks into a room.*

Naxia made to go, her shaking arm nearly tipping over the tray, and passed into another room with clumsy but feline grace.

Hyena tipped his head in her direction. ‘I’m training her.’ He gestured to a recliner. ‘Please sit down, Warlord Voonder.’

Voonder flung himself into a seat and tossed his cowl at Eli. It had scabbed patches of blood on it from the night before. Like he were hiding evidence of a crime scene, Eli balled it behind his back while Hyena lowered himself into a his seat. Eli was left standing.

‘Let’s get to business,’ said Voonder.

‘Certainly,’ said Hyena, clapping his hands. ‘I’ve been feeding my stock on beef, only the finest, as per Coyote’s request. I think the morsel is just about plump enough Or, even better! I’ve just had a consignment of boy scouts come in, found starved to death in Everdark Forest, and am looking to get them off my hands. A little scrawny, and a boisterous lot, but that’s how you like ‘em, isn’t it?’ He winked. ‘For you, you can have ‘em for just—’

Eli wrung Voonder’s cowl tight, digging his toes into the sole of his boots as if to anchor himself from running up and whaling on Sub Hyena and cracking that smug jaw of his.. Immoral scum. His jolly banter, how he talked to Voonder like he were his favourite customer ... it reminded him of The Goon.

Voonder probably even *was* his favourite customer. He probably helped pay for everything in this damn room.

Voonder interrupted Hyena. ‘Yes, yes, one of my merchant’s will be in contact. Until, then, reserve them for me. I’m here on other business.’

‘What do you mean?’ Hyena spared a glance at Eli.

‘Months ago,’ said Voonder, one leg propped on the recliner, ‘I sold Coyote Zarmn’s old stuff. Clothes, personal crap like that. There was something among them. I need it back.’

‘What, exactly?’

Voonder grinned. ‘A diary...’

It was him. She was sure of it. She’d seen wanted posters of him. They all had captured that glazed stare. The eyes of monster.

Yes. It was Voonder.

Naxia dropped the tray onto the kitchen counter, clawed down countertop with blunt nails. Tears blinded her, flushed down her cheeks in torrents. Dropped from her whiskers like beads of rain.

Her family had been employees to Queen Yorlandi. Her mother had been a cook, and her father a guard. Both were hard-working, patriotic. But most of all, they were loving. Everything they did was to further Naxia’s life, enrich her present for a prosperous future. But, like every child, she’d taken them for granted.

When Queen Yorlandi was assassinated, the Kytton Kingdom, a once peaceful and prosperous province, erupted into turmoil. Fights broke out on the streets, neighbours, who of opposing political factions hissed at each other, nights were split by riots, smashing bottles, screeching wounded. Every Kytton was clawing for the throne, as if Yorlandi had lidded the unruliness that simmered in the darkest thoughts of their kingdom.

One afternoon, Naxia journeyed home from school, through the rioting streets, to find nobody home. A knock came at the door. It was not her parents but a royal guard, like her father. His armour was

scratched and blood matted his muzzle where his whiskers had been rooted. He handed her a rushed letter and limped off without a word.

In it, she read that her parents were dead.

A rebel faction had started a fire at the palace. They both perished. Simple. The scribbled words carried the indifferent tone of a grocery list.

The news fell upon her like the crushing weight of a waterfall. Alone, grieving, surrounded by the fires of a civil war and without friends, the fifteen-year-old escaped to the nearby town of Cavallo in hope of finding a job. But she was treated like another brat, another orphan among the nest.

She slept on the streets, crying most nights, surviving on scraps of food and alley rats. That was when That Man appeared. With one hand he took her off the streets, and with the other handed her a mop and broom, to scrub and cook and perform demeaning chores with other orphans until somebody decided to buy her for whatever purpose.

Queen's Yorlandi's murder was the thread that unwoven her life, leading to the death of her parents. Leaving her alone. Naked to the evils of the world.

And who had tugged that thread?

He was sitting with That Man, chatting without a care, probably discussing the price of that boy.

This was her opportunity.

Naxia poured the flutes of wine down the drain (it was actually dead cider) and fetched "the good stuff", reserved only for the best customers. She poured it, smelt it. It was strong, loaded with alcohol. Good, good. Reaching into the cupboard, she took out a box of rat poison. The instant stuff. Because That Man lived underground, like a troll, rats were a common problem. She tipped the poison into one glass and stirred it with the end of a spoon. She smelled it again. Even her refined Kytton nose wasn't able to pick up a trace, so what hope had a barbarian like Voonder? She also considered lacing Hyena's

glass too with the lethal spice ... but went against it. Life here was miserable, but it kept her from starving. If Coyote returned and found out that she poisoned her apprentice, he would either kill her or reserve her for his most amoral customers.

Naxia lifted the tray. She wiped her eyes and put on her best phoney smile.

‘Vengeance is served, Your Unruliness.’

Voonder told him what the diary looked like, what box of crap it came in, and how much he’d sold it for. He never explained *why* he wanted it. Hyena—going only by his eyes—looked baffled. Either he genuinely had no clue of a dairy, or he had read it, knew about the treasure, and planned to claim it himself, behind Coyote’s back. Eli stared, trying to read him.

‘I can’t say I’ve ever come across a diary, Warlord Voonder. Are you sure you sold it to Coyote?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you sure you’ve not just misplaced it?’

‘Yes. Now go find it.’

Hyena put a hand under his turban and slicked his hair. He looked terribly warm. Beads of sweat formed in the sockets of his eyes.

‘I’m afraid, Warlord Voonder,’ he said. ‘That, even if I did have it, me or Coyote might have sold it. Stock changes hands in here every day. Besides, I’m a very busy man. I’ve appointments later. Can we discuss this another time, say, in a few days? My colleague, the innkeeper, Mr Barnes, would be more than happy to put you up for a couple of—’

‘No,’ said Voonder. For the first time he sounded irritable. ‘We’ve travelled far to get here. And *I’ve* got a clan to run. Now have a look for it. Or I will take my custom elsewhere. And trust me, Coyote would not like that.’

Hyena issued a nervous groan. The bellhop arrived with a fresh tray of drinks, looking brighter than when she had left the room. She placed two glasses on the table, one for Voonder, one for Hyena.

‘There you are,’ she said, before dutifully returning to Hyena’s side. Hyena was stroking his chin. But it was only now that he noticed the drinks. ‘Ah! Drinks! Drinks! Finally! Try it Voonder,’ he said, raising a glass. Eli thought he was toasting Voonder, but as Naxia took the drink and sipped from it and handed it back. She was his taster.

‘It’s the Wild Boar’s best,’ said Hyena, ‘their most popular brand. I’m a good judge of these things. I can tell you’ll love it.’

Voonder picked up his glass. He swirled it under his nose, like a connoisseur.

He put it down. ‘I don’t want it.’

‘Go on, have a sip,’ said Hyena, almost pleading. Even the bellhop seemed to be compelling Voonder, staring at the goblin with an goading expression.

‘*Try it,*’ said Hyena.

Voonder picked it up again. He smelt it again. Something didn’t seem right to Eli. Hyena was pressurising him like a control freak. Was it ... spiked?

Try the drink Voonder, thought Eli excitedly, *try it try it try it.*

No such luck. Voonder put it down.

‘The diary,’ he said. ‘Now.’

Hyena sighed. ‘Very well.’ He turned to Naxia. ‘Fetch the good Warlord his diary, will you? There’s a few unlabelled boxes in the storage room. You’ll find them in the far right-hand corner—’

‘And a sack,’ added Voonder.

‘Yes. And a sack. In one of them you’ll find a little blue book. Bring it to me.’ Eli thought he winked at her, but he didn’t get a good enough angle to say for sure.

Naxia frowned, left the room.

Little was said in the five minutes she was away. Eli shifted his feet, holding Voonder's cowl by his fingertips, staving off the sleep that hung on him like a fog. Voonder sat, one boot propped on the recliner, staring at his glass of champagne with a sour expression. Hyena was actually quite funny to watch. He had his turban pulled down uncovering a bulbous nose, and was wiping the sweat under on his upper lip. Now *he* knew what it was like to be the victim. To meet his match. A hyena eaten by a tiger.

'Will you excuse me for a moment?' said Hyena. 'Just need to use the restroom.'

He went off, the tail of his bathrobe trailing behind.

That left Eli was left alone with Voonder. Voonder was looked at him, a ferocious grin creasing each side of his mouth. A thread of cold sweat crawl down Eli's back.

He looked around the room, trying to ignore him.

There were three doors in Coyote and Hyena's lounge. Hyena had exited through the left door. The right door was where Naxia went to search for the diary. Another door, at the far end of the room, had stolen Eli's attention ever since he walked into this underground apartment. The door was made of steel, not wood, and had a hatch that served as a peep/feeding window. It bore a cold, almost unholy aura, like that of a torture chamber.

Eli, drawn by curiosity, moved towards it.

'Boymeat, what are you doing?' said Voonder, but he made no attempt to stop Eli. Eli gently slid the metal hatch aside and peeked. The smell struck as if he'd opened a parcel of rotten meat. Inside, mattress were strewn over the floor. Children and teens lay on them. Disturbed by the light, they sprang on their beds, drawing their moth-eaten blankets to themselves, their gaunt, gray faces gaping back at Eli.

'Holy shit...'

Eli closed the hatch, stumbled back.

He walked back to Voonder's side, without recollection of having to do so.

'What's wrong, boymeat? Did you see anything?'

Eli shook his head. 'No, no.'

He thought of Dane, the boy he met in the Wilder Clan's lair. How he ignored his pleas to help him, telling himself that couldn't afford emotional attachments in the name of survival. Dane hadn't been too worse off than the children he'd seen in that room.

Shame coursed through him. Scalded him.

Hyena and the bellhop returned almost at the same time. Hyena was just sitting down, apologising for his rudeness, when Naxia said, 'I found the book.'

Hyena gawked at her. 'What?'

'I ... found it,' she repeated, quietly this time, as if realising she'd done something wrong. She was carrying the book on her tray like a sandwich.

'Excellent!' said Voonder.

Hyena looked less than pleased. He rose from his seat. He advanced on Naxia, who backed away. She hit the wall. Towering over her, putting her in his shadow, he leaned into her furry pointed ear. '*Useless bitch.*'

He snatched the book from her tray before flouncing back on his recliner, leaving Naxia alone, gripping her tray, biting her bottom lip, trying not to cry.

'Well, here it is,' said Hyena, waving it in the air.

'Excellent,' said Voonder. 'Hand it over'

Hyena crossed his legs. Eli got a flash of his white thighs. 'Not so fast, Voonder. We need to negotiate a price. You sold it to me, I'm selling it back. Mind you, something like this won't come cheap. It a diary belonging to the old Warlord himself. And look! It's signed by him, on all two hundred pages. Now that I *think* about it, I'm not sure I want to part with it.'

Voonder smiled.

‘So tell me, Your Graciousness. What have *you* got that will make me part with such treasure?’

It was the Eli realised. Realised why Voonder was keeping a leash on him. Voonder could have killed him any time he wanted. in the torture room, back at the room of their inn... All he needed from Eli was the knowledge that Zarmn had mapped a treasure in his dairy. But he had dragged Eli with him, all the way to Cavallo.

No, thought Eli. *He wouldn't*.

But he did.

‘I plan on selling him,’ said Voonder.

Now Eli finally knows what has kept him alive, from being eaten. Eli is going pale, paler, accentuating the chocolate-coloured bruise he sustained on his forehead during his capture. The boy's breath is caught in his throat and his heart beats faster. Yes; he has realized that the only reason he is here and *not* on a spit back in Savage Forest is because his new home will be with Coyote and Hyena. His freedom, for Zarmn's diary.

‘*This* boy?’ says Hyena laughingly. ‘What makes you think I'd want him? Look, he's damaged goods. At least my stock are healthy and unharmed. Why would I exchange a treasure for this pasty toe rag?’

‘Because,’ says Voonder, ‘this boy is special. His name is Eli. And he comes from a very rich family in Polywerp, who own a very lucrative business in the mining industry. This boy, I've come to give him not as a slave ... but as an investment.’

Eli is now swaying on his feet, his palm on his brow. Voonder knows these words by heart. He has thought about them a lot, and of the fedora-wearing thug who uttered them.

‘Eli's parents will be willing to pay a huge amount to have him back,’ he continues. ‘The last I checked, the reward was fifty thousand

polies. You can sell him back, and earn a huge profit.’ It is fun reciting these lines.

Hyena looks Eli up and down. ‘With all due respect,’ says Hyena, ‘I don’t believe you. This boy looks like he’s been washed ashore.’

‘Which is why I have brought the necessary paperwork...’ He pulls out folded papers from his shorts. Hyena orders the Kytton-human to read them. As she shuffles through documents faking Eli’s heritage, Voonder gazes at the boy. It has been fun with him. All that spunk. He would have tasted good. Rolling in money he and that orc acquired over the years, he must have been well-kempt, eating fine food and sleeping on soft beds. Eli stares back at Voonder. His luscious blue eyes crying, *You bastard.*

Yes Eli, you’re right. And now you know what it is liked to be deceived. Now you will choke on your own medicine. Enjoy your future life washing dishes and clipping toenails for this pitiful creature and Boss Coyote, until the day comes when someone else will buy you and makes your life a misery.

The Kytton-girl says in her sweet, reedy voice of hers, with a hint of disappointment, ‘It looks like he’s telling the truth.’

Hyena takes the folded papers.

‘Oh,’ Voonder continues, ‘if you are wondering why I don’t sell this boy off myself ... well’—he points to his own smirking mug—‘who would trust this little face?’

Hyena picks up the dairy—which h’d set of the tray—and flicks through the pages, his body hunched in concentration.

‘This is a tough one,’ he says. ‘I mean, you’re an awful shrewd one.’

‘I know,’ says Voonder, smelling Eli’s sweat. He is a handshake away from becoming merchandise.

Hyena stands up and holds out his hand.

‘Fine,’ he says. ‘You’ve talked me into it.’

This is it. With the grip of a human hand he will become impossibly rich. That little blue book will fulfil his wildest desires. The Clan will be able to purchase new weapons, vehicles, A-grade equipment. They will evolve from spear-wielding rabble into a private military. Other clans won't stand a chance. Their slings and arrows would bounce off their armour and Voonder will crush them and all who oppose his plans for a united clan under his rule. With their collective power, they will strike fear into every nation of man, orc and elf. And they will all whisper Voonder's name ... and despair.

But then he would lose Eli. He can't yet bring himself to snatch Hyena's hand, for he has grown a strange attachment to the boy. It is not like having to give back a puppy—Voonder is beyond sentimentalities. When he first laid eyes on Eli, his stomach growled for him. Like a child seeing a limited-edition chocolate bar. Once it's gone it's gone, and when it is, he can only *imagine* its taste, the flavours melting in his mouth. The sugar high.

That day, back in Savage Forest, Voonder had no intentions of selling Eli back to his fake rich parents. He would've paid the fifty thousand polies to cook the boy himself. Zarmn's diary just happened to get in the way.

Which has now led to this moment. A handshake. How hard can it be? He has dozens of slaves he can choose back home, to be prepared any way he liked. Hell, he can buy a year's supply of boy scouts for the *whole clan* with the treasure that awaited him.

'Do we have a deal, Warlord Voonder?' asks Hyena.

Voonder is undecided. He looks at Eli, who is clenching his fists, outraged that he has been betrayed, a second time, within the space of two days.

Voonder sighs.

Echoing Hyena's words, he says, ruefully, 'I'm not sure I want to part with him.'

'Then we don't have a deal,' says Hyena.

He lowers his hand. In an instant, the deal is gone. He slips Zarmn's diary into his robe pocket. Eli's heart has skipped a beat. He is probably wondering what the hell is going on.

Voonder picks up his glass of champagne, makes a toast. 'I'm sorry for wasting your time.'

'Not to worry,' says Hyena, also raising his glass. 'It happens all the time. Sometimes people come in here and offer me money for my stock, but I refuse. Sometimes, you just can't let go of what you've become attached to.'

'True,' says Voonder. 'Very true.'

They clink their glasses. They drink. In the corner of his eye, as he lets the vile fluid rush down his throat, Voonder notices the Kytton-human biting her pink bottom lip.

Hyena hooks his turban back over his nose and lets out a sigh.

A brief silence.

'Tastes good, doesn't it?' says Voonder.

'Most certainly!' says Hyena. 'It's the innkeeper's finest! He makes the stuff himself, you—.'

Hyena drops his glass. He clutches his stomach and groans in agony. Voonder swirls the glass in his hand, watching him.

'V-V-Voonder!' cries Hyena. His skin turns red, gorged on blood. Hyena's stomach squeals as it dissolves within itself. His heart hammers, his breaths becomes shallow. 'W-what h-h-have you *done to me!*'

He is on floor now, clutching at his wailing belly.

Voonder tosses his glass on the floor and crosses to Hyena. His Kytton-human slave can only watch, hands clasped over her nose, her whiskers poking between her fingers. Eli cries Voonder's name in an croaked, excited voice. But Voonder pays no heed. He kneels down and picks the diary from Hyena's pocket. Along with the key to the cellar door.

‘A word of advice,’ says Voonder, whispering in his ear. ‘If you’re trying to poison someone, never leave the room.’ Hyena strains his look on him.

‘*W-wha...?*’ he says. His eyes are septic, and his face is plum-purple, ready to burst.

In case he is in too much agony to work it out, Voonder says, ‘I switched the glasses while no one was looking. Enjoy your stay in Hell. I’m sure the orphans you and Coyote have kept will want to have a word with you.’

Voonder grabs takes his cowl from Eli and hangs it over his arm. The boy is immobile, staring at Voonder with a mix of horror, incredulity ... and perhaps awe. He follows Voonder, like a good little dog, as he unlocks the door and leaves. The last thing Voonder hears is the jackhammer beat of Hyena’s heart slowly dying; vomiting; and the sound of scraping metal, the opening of a door. The Kytton-human is freeing her friends. Soon, they will spill onto the streets like chickens, their price tags gone. Free.

Chapter 6

The Goon (Continued)

It was a new day. And a perfect time to move on.

Yesterday's events seemed so unreal (in a pleasant way) that The Goon thought he'd *dreamt* them. Once out of Savage Forest he had set up camp. Not once did he hear Eli's whiney voice waking him up —'I'm starving!' 'Goonie, are you asleep?' 'Cut that out! You're snoring like a pig!'. And no Eli digging his snout into The Goon's personal life. His business was a treasure The Goon kept to himself, too precious to dole out as campfire tales.

Speaking of treasure ... he hadn't forgotten about the nugget of info that kid Dane told him, before he found himself a little tied up. In fact, The Goon had lay on the grass last night, staring at the sky, wondering about it. The more he considered, the more a secret goblin hoard seemed unreal.

But what if it *was* the true? Well, The Goon had plenty of times on his hands. He'd pretty conned the land dry, his mug-shot now plastered in dozens of police stations and guard houses. It was time to leave the land and make for another, begin a fresh life. But first, he was going to check out Dane's story. Just to be on the safe side. While Voonder's polies made him comfortable, Zarmn's booty would allow him to live the life of a mafia boss.

And what would he do with such wealth...?

He'd thought about that, too. A chunk he would use to buy himself a house—no, a *mansion*, four storeys high and a lawn as big as a farm. He'd get a rocket car, one that'd go from zero to three-hundred quicker than you could say *Eli*, and a swimming pool, and his own personal zoo, and lots of other fashionable, trite shit that meant nothing if you didn't have a family to *share* it with.

What The Goon really wanted was that guard's head on a pike, the guard who murdered his wife and caused a subsequent stampede that trampled his son. He never forgot his name—Captain Leo Bradley, who had 'acted in self-defence' and was therefore acquitted of unlawful misconduct.

With his treasure, The Goon would advertise him to underground organisations: 100,000 POLIES ALIVE (A BONUS OF 5,000 IF YOU BREAK HIS ARMS). Then The Goon was going to torture him, before slowly killing him. Or, why target Bradley? Why not kill *his* family? It made sense, didn't it? A life for a life. And if The Goon knew one thing it was business, and that seemed like a fair exchange.

But first he needed the cash. And breakfast.

After tying up his horse, he now found himself in Cavallo, wandering the bustling streets and its maze of stalls, yodelling merchant and fierce hagglers. Children laughed and chased each other through lanes human traffic and merchant wagons. The hiss of smoking meat and the aroma of fresh bread sweetened the air. The Goon's stomach growled. This all took him back to his days in Polywerp, running the family haberdashery business.

Cavallo was the halfway point before the location of Zarmn's fabled treasure. It was also the birthplace of Eli. Funny, even now the little turd was still creeping up on him. It was normal, The Goon told himself, to think about him. Things weren't *all bad* with Eli. He made The Goon laugh (sometimes), and kept him company on lonely roads. He was *kind of* like a son, but far from it. More like an annoying little cousin, who broke your stuff and never stopped talking. He wasn't a patch on The Goon's son. First of all, his son smelled nice, like talc; meanwhile Eli's hair always had that greasy smell that reminded The Goon of cheese and onion crisps. And, along with poor personal hygiene, he'd picked up many bad habits off the streets: slurping, picking his toenails, chewing with his mouth open.

It was only the *company* he missed, not Eli.

Maybe I'll buy a parrot while I'm here, The Goon thought. *Call it Eli. It would eat less, talk less, and would certainly smell better.*

He was passing through a food court now, and the smell of fried sausage and griddled scones was intoxicating. He bought a cooked breakfast and ate it with his hands as he walked. He was thinking of

things—his family, Zarmn’s treasure, the fifty thousand polies chinking around in his pouch—when he saw Eli.

He almost dropped his eggs and bacon on the ground. No... it couldn’t have been him. He’d sold him, back in Savage Forest. To *Voonder*. But here he was, walking beside someone dressed like the Grim Reaper.

It was those eyes; blue, transparent, like polished crystal...

He passed him in an instant. In a split second he was gone.

The Goon slowed his pace, looked back, but lost him in the crowd. *I’m bloody seeing things*, he thought. It was definitely a trick of the eye. What were the chances of finding Eli here, in the same town, at this time of day; that *Voonder* had not only let him live, but *escape*? He looked at his fry, smelled it. He chucked in the trash. *That’s the last time I buy meat from a vendor.*

No way on heaven, earth, or Polywerp (as wife used to rhyme) had that been Eli. Cavallo was a cesspool of orphans, their parents killed by raiders during the course of their trades and travels. The boy he passed wore dirt-clothes and had a bowl-cut, like Eli. But so what? Bowl-cuts were the style of the poor.

But still ... it was a weird moment. And that Grim Reaper figure...

A minute further down the road, going nowhere in particular, he saw something that took his mind off it and made him laugh. About fifty orphans (he could tell from their bowl-cuts) were pooling out of a place called the Wild Boar Inn. They were jostling against the crowd, dropping tins and packets of food that they all cradled in their arms. Their bare feet slapped on the stone pavement. Chasing after them was a big man with a beer gut, shaking his fist and cursing their names. The orphans made no hesitation—nor did they stop to pick up what they dropped. They simply ran, the crowd avoiding them like bubonic rats.

School’s out at the poorhouse, The Goon thought with a snicker.

He fancied a drink. The Wild Boar Inn was closest, and the owner obviously needed his custom, after being raided. It looked like a nice wee watering hole. Passing the bearded man—who was collecting his stuff off the ground—The Goon went inside.

Without the tyrannical reign of Voonder, the Wilder Clan descended into chaos.

So far Holden had avoided danger. He made himself scarce around mealtimes and evening entertainment; this often consisted of forcing two slaves to duel in ‘The Pit’, the loser becoming tomorrow’s breakfast. Because Holden was Voonder’s personal assistant, goblins never dared touch him, hesitated to even glance at him.

But now Voonder was gone. And nobody knew for how long... or if he’d be coming back.

Voonder was a tyrant on the throne, but Rawrs’s was no peach either. The substitute Warlord, who was also Voonder’s and best friend, recreationally slaughtered anything he set his eyes on—including Voonder’s own stock of slaves. Last night, Rawrs had thrown not two slaves into The Pit, but twenty. A bruise-mottled, bone-breaking free-for-all ensued. The brawling, bare-skinned boys, cramped together, was like watching—as one goblin put it—a barrel of shaved chimps fighting over a banana. Holden had fought in the pit before (this was before his promotion to Voonder’s pet) and he knew what it was like to have your humanity stripped, to be demoted to an animal level.

Because Rawrs was Voonder’s friend, he was no threat to Holden. He respected the Warlord’s most prized possession—it was just the common slaves he trampled on. He was also immune from Hanz’s violence, and Larcomn’s sly torments. Such insolence, in Voonder’s eyes, bore a high price.

Holden waited in the breakfast room, wearing a uniform that matched his purple choker. A goblin had caught him trying to bunk

out of his chores and forced him to work. Hanz was eating, as was Rawrs. For some reason Larcomn, the trade advisor, had no appetite, merely picking at the food on his plate. About a dozen other goblins crowded the table, laughing and bickering and snatching meat from trays. Holden stared blankly to the side, blocking out the sound of ripping meat, teeth scraping on bone, the fact that it belonged to one of the nineteen losers in last night's game of The Pit.

If he hadn't desensitised to such brutality, he'd emotionally collapse.

'Fetch me more drink!'

'Where's the bone bucket?'

'Gimme some of that shoulder roast!'

As Holden refilled glasses with blood liqueur, collected plates and endured verbal abuse, his mind drifted to the meals he'd spent with his family. That was another era ago, one he missed so much that it felt like a growing tumour, threatening to swell large enough to burst, sending him, crying, to the ground.

A goblin spoke at him, juice flecking from his mouth. It was Karl, a rare goblin-human cross-breed with cruel eyes and unusually smooth features. While goblins detested goblin-human relationships, and the taboo spawn that resulted, Karl's unwavering malice earned him respect and the role of army captain, answerable to Hanz. His lacy, silvery hair reminded Holden of spider silk.

Karl pointed to the ground. 'Blondie! I dropped my food!' What was probably a shin—a severed bone protruding from one end—lay on the stone floor.

With a sigh of oppression, Holden bunched the cuff of his shirt in his hand and knelt down to pick it up. Karl booted him up the backside. Holden flew forward and hit the ground. Zsider—who also waited that morning—hurried to help him, but he tripped over an outstretched goblin leg and he, too, fell to the ground. Laughter and jeers erupted. Holden was hoisted up by the cuff of his shirt, slammed

against the wall. It was Karl again. The rotten stench of his breath was revolting.

‘What makes you so special, huh?’ Karl said with a self-amused grin. ‘What makes you so special, not be food yerself?’

Holden didn’t resist. Any movement would have given Karl an excuse to retaliate. He had learned to manage unpredictable behaviour from being with Voonder. He stared at Karl blankly, blurring his vision, looking right through him.

Karl then turned his head to address his cohorts. ‘I think Holden should be back on the menu. Whaddaya say, boys?’ For a fleeting moment, Holden thought could hear the agreements, the *zhing!* of sharpened knives.

But there was silence. The ‘you’ve gone too far’ kind.

Everyone was staring at Karl.

‘No,’ said Hanz, the fiery-haired general. ‘He’s Voonder’s property. Let him go.’

Karl grunted. He quickly released his grip. ‘You’ve gone too soft.’

He sat back down and, in seconds, the hubbub resumed.

‘Are you alright?’ asked Zsider. He stood over Holden, who was on the ground, a hand on his shoulder.

Holden wiped his face. He was crying. He sniffed, hard, and regained his composure.

‘Yeah. I’m fine.’

They continued service. Breakfast was barely over when it was time to prepare lunch.

He bought a whiskey. His own stash had long run dry. He used sleep with one eye open in case Eli fancied a tippie from the flask The Goon kept in his coat. *Put that down, you thieving little shit*, he would say. *We’re not made of money!*

He thought of Eli's mischievous smirk, his childish protests, and knocked back another shot. The amber fluid washed down his throat, lighting a cosy fire in his belly. Delicious. Many times he'd told himself to be careful with the drink—*today it's a glass tomorrow it's the whole bottle*. But he dismissed the idea of moderation. He was rich. And what better way to spend your money than getting banjoed and mulling over your own thoughts?

The Wild Boar had been trashed. In the little wooden pub (serving only himself and some solitary drunk), chairs were overturned, tables were skewed, bottles were smashed from cabinets. The orphans had left a horrible smell—a urinary fug. The barmaid busied herself spraying freshener and brushing up shards of glass. She had purple hair and green skin—possibly a refugee from Zardur market?. The Goon didn't bother asking her what happened. The only English she'd know were brand names, most probably.

For all its grubby children and unfond memories of Eli, Cavallo wasn't such a bad dig. He would stay here the night, tuck up in one of those posh dos with red carpets and gold banisters and clean towels. Then he'd travel to where that kid, Dane, mentioned, for a wee treasure hunt. With each sip of whiskey, the notion of hiring a head hunter for Captain Bradley developed from a dream to a plausible idea. But while Voonder's money allowed him to eat and sleep comfortably, it wasn't enough to interest a head-hunter... especially when an officer of the law was the mark.

Someone burst in just as The Goon drained the last of his whiskey. It was the man who'd been gathering his stuff off the street. He stumbled in.

'Zlanks! Givus a hand wiv this, would ye?'

The barmaid helped him heave the load onto a table. The man then hurried out back. *Must be the owner*, thought The Goon. Funny how they all had beards and tattoos.

A minute later the owner ran back out to the bar, out of breath, crying out in a wheezy, terrified voice—‘Slanks! Quick! Call an ambulance!’

He shook his head.

‘No! Don’t! Call the po... Oh shit shit shit..! Doesn’t matter!’

And with that he sprinted into the back room again.

Someone’s had a heart attack, was The Goon’s first thought. The barmaid glanced around her, seeking a translation, not understanding a word she was told. The Goon didn’t care about the emergency, whatever it was. But the fact that he didn’t want police or an ambulance made him wonder. The drunkard, perched at the other end of the bar, also showed no concern, too busy amusing himself with a beer mat.

Nothing better to do, The Goon passed out back. The barmaid gobbled something after him, but he ignored her, cutting through the grimy kitchen and finding the cellar steps. At the bottom he found an open door, one with a big lock. Inside, the innkeeper was kneeling beside a dead body in a bathrobe. Even at a distance, The Goon saw the eyes budging from the corpse’s sockets and the pained expression on his waxen face.

The innkeeper sobbed, holding his hands to his head. He was rocking back and forth—‘*Oh God oh God oh God ... What am I going to do?*’

‘Hey,’ called The Goon. The innkeeper didn’t even glance at him.

‘No, no! Now everyone will know!’ he cried.

‘What happened here?’ The Goon asked, moving into the room. *The owner’s got himself a nice crib, here*, he thought.

The Goon asked again what had happened, but questions did no good. The innkeeper was too busy wallowing in grief, as if it were his wife he’d lost and not some guy in a bathrobe. He rhymed on—speaking to himself—about how people would know; about the business he kept under his stairs; how’d become currency in jail.

The Goon approached him and looked at the body. The man was in his forties. His turban was pulled away from his face. Blood stained his chin and tears glazed his cheeks. It didn't look like a heart attack. And The Goon, didn't care either. He didn't wasn't going to hang about in case guards or the police arrived. He was ready to turn tail but something caught his eye: a kid peeking out from a metal door at the end of the room.

'Hey, you!'

The kid darted. The Goon rushed after him. He came to a room with old mattresses and tattered blankets spread out across the floor, its air stinking of sweat and farts and piss. The kid—no older than ten years old, was hurrying towards the back, a teddy bear in his hand. However, with no other exits in the room, he was cornered, unable to do anything but cower as The Goon advanced and picked him up by his collar and held him against the wall.

'What went on here?' said The Goon.

The boy was crying, squeezing his teddy's arm. Stuffing oozed its missing leg.

'There's a dead body out there,' said The Goon. 'So you must've seen something.' 'You better tell me what you saw.'

'I tell you!' sobbed the boy. 'I'll tell you! Just don't hurt me!'

Surprised how quick the kid gave in, The Goon set him down, but kept him cornered under his shadow thrown by the room's naked light bulb. Slightly tipsy, he was enjoying the role of hardboiled detective.

'I *didn't see* who killed him!' said the boy. 'But I promise it wasn't *me!*'

'So, he was killed? How'd they kill him?'

The boy shook his head, shrugged his shivering shoulders. 'I... I didn't see... but... I saw *s-someone...*'

At that moment the innkeeper came in, rubbing his eyes. He glared at the boy. 'You!' he said. 'Scallywag!' He marched closer. 'Who *did* this? Who let you all *go?*'

The Goon didn't need detective skills to work out the game he was playing. The corpse in the robe was a slave-hunter. Take the young filth off the streets, sell them on to someone who wants them, like cats to a crummy takeaway. And this innkeeper was harbouring him. He'd seen it before in other towns and, although The Goon had an eye for business (and pretty much broke every ethical code going), he hated slave-hunters. *Hated* them. It made him think of his son. The of a child kidnapped into one of these pounds.

It took willpower to resist whipping out his blunderbuss and making the innkeeper's snivelling head go boom.

'Who did you see, boy?' said The Goon softly.

The boy hugged his teddy. 'It was ... a bigger boy. We were all in here, me and the other kids. And he looked in..'

'What did he look like?' asked The Goon.

'He had brown hair,' said the boy. 'And he was all dirty.'

'Did you see what he was wearing?'

'You better tell us how it happened, you little shit!' said the innkeeper, approaching, his face flushed with rage. 'You better—'

'*Back off!*' said The Goon. He parted his trench-coat to display the blunderbuss holstered at his hip. The innkeeper froze. He looked insulted that someone was treating him in this fashion.

He didn't say another word.

The Goon asked again—'What was he wearing?'—and the boy shook his head.

'I couldn't see what he was wearing...'

'What did he look like? Can you tell me?'

The boy bit his lip, thinking very hard. 'He ... he had bright blue eyes.'

The Goon's felt the strange resonance of *déjà vu*. A part of him—the rational part, the sane part—told it wasn't Eli. It was impossible.

'Did the boy have a bowl-cut hair?' he asked.

The boy hesitated—perhaps thinking it a trick question. But he nodded. ‘A-and ...there was another boy, in here. One of the bigger ones. He said something when he saw him. “Is that ... *Al ... Oll...*”’

‘Eli?’

The boy nodded.

Of *course*. Eli *would* be here. Why *wouldn't* he? He couldn't get rid of the little dipshit. Every time The Goon drew the breath of a new beginning, Eli wafted in like a bad smell. He had left him with a flesh-eating Warlord. So how come he ended up in Cavallo, miles from Savage Forest. Unharmred? And what was he doing here?

There was no mistaking it. The kid had seen Eli.

‘Was there someone with him?’ The Goon asked. ‘Someone in a black cloak?’

The boy stared up at him, silent. He didn't know.

He turned to the innkeeper. ‘You asking *me*? Well ... yes. There was a fellow in a black cloak with him. Except ... I don't think he *was* a fellow. He had a green face. I think he might've been a goblin.’

Voonder. Who else could it be?

‘Tell me—what were they doing here! What were they doing in a place like this!’

The innkeeper stammered over his words. ‘I-I-I-I was told—t—that goblin told me—they were here for something. A book—that was it! They wanted a book.’

‘A *book*?’ The Goon scanned around the room, with its damp mattresses and chamber pots in the corners. It looked like no library *he'd* ever been to. Maybe Voonder came here with Eli with plans to reimburse his losses by selling him to a slave-hunter. It made sense, especially if he discovered that Eli wasn't an heir to fortune.

But what was this about a book? What was—

And then it dawned on him. The pieces fit into place, and his jaw dropped. *Zarmn had a book, with the path to the treasure drawn in, Dane had told him back in Savage Forest. Voonder sold it off to a guy called Boss Coyote. But don't worry. I've got it—he'd tapped his*

temple—*up here. Photographic memory. Only one other person knows about the book. My cellmate. But he's probably dead by now. They caught him while we were escaping...*

And what were the chances that his cellmate had brown, bowl-cut hair, ocean-blue eyes and was called Eli? And, upon his capture, he'd bargained with Voonder (bargained how The Goon had taught him to bargain) and told him the location of the book? And that he and the good Warlord had gone on a little quest together?

If they had diary, that meant...

The Goon hurried to leave, but before he did, he scooped the boy under his arm—who started kicking and whinging. He was passing the dead body in the bathrobe when the innkeeper called after him—‘Sir! Please! Wait! *Please don't tell anyone!* My family, *they can't find out that I've—*’

Shut up. Shut up you pig.

Back in the pub, the alien barmaid was gobbling on the phone, trying to get the person on the other end to understand her. She looked at the kid The Goon held under his arm: *Where did that come from?*

Guessing she was oblivious to the innkeeper's secret, he dumped the kid on her—‘Take him. He's yours now.’ He then picked up the phone, said the address of the inn—‘Send the police, now’—and put it down. The barmaid looked at the sobbing boy in her arms as if he were an strange, but welcomed, Christmas present. The drunkard kept on drinking.

The Goon left the bar, untied his horse at the tables, and headed for the treasure.

Chapter 7

The Showdown

Through the windows of Voonder's carriage, the sands of The Valley of the Sun burned bright and gold. Every mile or so, they'd pass a camel, its corpse swarmed with buzzards and its bones dried to chalk. In this heat, the rocky mountains in the distance seemed to shimmer, as beyond a pane of water.

Eli sat silently, listening to the monotonous grinding of wheels on sand, the parched snorts of the carriage horses. The Valley of the Sun lay fifty miles east of Cavallo.

And a further fifty miles in was the treasure, according to the diary.

When Zarmn—or *Warlord* Zarmn—first came into power, the first thing he did was construct a tomb. It was a secret project, with only the architects, himself, and a few choice guards knowing about it. Zarmn was no spring chicken—he was the oldest Warlord to date and wanted a burial worthy of his grandeur. The project took three years to complete. When Zarmn was executed, his personal assistant approached Voonder and requested the body.

The treasure was buried with Zarmn. The ex-Warlord was a believer in an afterlife, and wanted to travel there with his worldly glories. To protect the tomb from grave robbers, he enlisted a group of goblins as permanent sentinels, who had sworn allegiance to no future Warlord, including Voonder.

The sentinels would be waiting when they arrived. Voonder said he would negotiate with them, impose his authority as the existing Warlord.

If, however, they refused to hand over the treasure...

'I'd just have to kill them. Wouldn't I?' Voonder had said with a sharklike smile.

He sat in the carriage as last time, on the opposite side and facing Eli, contenting himself with Zarmn's diary.

The heat made Eli deliriously sleepy. He forgotten to grab water back in Cavallo, and Voonder didn't seem to need the stuff; goblins were resistant to heat. Sweat beaded Eli's forehead and ran down his

neck. His tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth. His own stomach rumbled and in the confines of the carriage, it sounded like a bear. His exhausted eyes burned. He hadn't bathed in three days, and he could smell his own odour ... and Voonder probably could too. So Eli kept still, not wanting to draw attention. The last meal Voonder had was that Cavallo orphan (a memory so seemingly distant Eli hardly believed it hardly happened. So it wouldn't be long until Voonder was hungry again.

It would be night when they arrived at the tomb.

Voonder had every opportunity to kill Eli, but he still had him tag along. Even more so, he refused to sell him to Sub Hyena. Was he savouring him? Keeping him for a celebration feast? Maybe he'd grown attached to Eli, valued him too much to eat, like a novelty birthday cake. Maybe Voonder intended to enslave him to the Wilder Clan, clamp on another personal assistant's collar.

Fat chance that Eli would let that happen. He had overcome too many hurdles to become a slave. He hadn't forgotten the reason why he was here, what allowed The Goon to convince him into conning Voonder: It was because of the Wilder Clan Eli was an orphan. It if weren't for them, he would've had an education, a promising future. Parents who loved him. But they were dead, and even though Voonder was not directly involved in their murder, what better way to get revenge on the clan than by bumping off their leader?

Eli remembered his family. Although they had died only four years ago, they were a bleary memory, like a badly formed photograph, only recognisable from his mom's earthy dresses and his dad's work clothes. They were both couriers, delivering stock between companies and suppliers. When they had a long way to travel, a or big job that required two sets of hands, they would leave Eli in daycare. One day his parents didn't collect him. Little Eli was waiting outside the daycare, holding the lunchbox his mom had bought him. It was raining when the news arrived: his parents' trade

wagon had been attacked by the Wilder Clan. Nobody was left alive, not even the hired help consisting of young boys.

Eli was shaken, but the news didn't quite hit home. Not until he spent his first day at the orphanage—full of other children like him, some younger, many older—and when a stern voice called *Lights out!* and it all went dark only then did Eli curl on his bunk bed and cried himself to sleep, realising that he would never see his parents again.

Life was tough, but he was tougher. Portions at the orphanage canteen were meagre, so he'd nick fruit from stalls and run like hell when someone spotted him. It had amazed him. When he had parents, everyone was fussing around him, telling him what a cute boy he was, what *gorgeous blue eyes*. Without a family, wearing the same clothes five days in a row, nobody wanted to know. He felt like a rat.

Some nights, the orphanage was full. Sleeping on the street was Eli's first truly terrifying experience: dark, freezing, a damp carpet for warmth, surrounded by the sounds of scratching mice and brawling drunks.

With his parents gone, Eli's life had collapsed like a house of cards. And, somewhere, the Wilder clan were laughing, eating and drinking the blood of boys. For years Eli nurtured that grudge, let it simmer.

Now they were going to get the revenge they rightfully deserved.

Eli clung to this thought, letting his head tilt to the side. Breathing the warm air, through the carriage window, Eli closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Holden took off his uniform and dressed into his **CHICK-MAGNET** shirt. It was a birthday present his dad had bought him two months before Melissa was kidnapped. It was the same shirt he wore on his journey with Voonder. Since then, he'd thought of it as a kind of good

luck charm; with it, he had thwarted ogres, saved his sister and, most suprisingly, survived Voonder.

Without Voonder's protection, he needed all the luck he could get.

He looked at his watch. Just after seven. It'd been a long, gruelling day, scrubbing floors, washing pots and serving meat platters. His status as a personal assistant used to spare him from such chores. But now Voonder was lollygagging somewhere with his *new* pet, and everyone took advantage of Holden's faded immunity.

Tonight, most of the goblins were at The Pit, watching slaves in battle. 'The Pit! The Pit!' they had chanted after dinner, as if it were the denouement of the evening. The remaining slaves who were not made to watch and serve snacks and beverages had retired to their chambers. Right now, Holden wanted nothing more than to kick off his shoes and curl up on Voonder's bed. But Karl barged in.

Holden immediately stood up straight.

'What's the matter, Blondie?' said Karl, sauntering into the room. 'You look scared.'

'What do you want?' asked Holden. He tried to mask the fear in his voice. And was failing. 'This is Voonder's private room. You aren't allowed in here.'

Before he knew it he was pressed against the back wall, a sweaty green hand at his throat. He smelled on Karl's breath the week's dinners. His smooth face with its sharp teeth were inches away from Holden's.

'Watch what way you speak to me, you little shit!' With his other hand he brought up a knife. No, not a knife. A machete. It was the type they used to decapitate cows.

'You wouldn't hurt me,' said Holden.

'No? Do you want a bet? It's only a matter of time, Blondie. Voonder's not here. He's not here to protect you. I could gut you now and say that you ran off into Savage Forest and got eaten. And

Voonder would be none the wiser. Face it, he's hardly gonna miss a little sissy like you, is he?'

Karl scaped the machete along the wall to the left side of Holden's face. It made a boney sound—a hollow squeal. A sound that Holden had come to live with these past several months.

Voonder's door opened, and Max and Zsider walked in. They stood still, as if they'd interrupted a meeting. Karl looked at them, looked back at Holden. Smiling, he withdrew his knife from the wall.

'If I were you,' he said, 'I'd sleep with one eye open.'

As sudden as he entered, he sauntered out of the room, Max and Zsider stepping out of his way.

Holden was crouched against the wall, his shaking hands to his face.

His friends rushed over to him, their bare feet patting on Voonder's carpet.

'Holden, are you okay?' said Max. 'Did he hurt you?'

Holden shook his head. He was crying. He felt like he was losing his mind. He missed his family more than anything right now. If Max and Zsider hadn't come into the room...

Holden cried hard now. He wasn't going to last the night.

'Rise and shine, Elicious.'

Eli opened his gunk-shut eyes and saw Voonder staring him in the face. Eli cried out and jumped, bumped his head on the carriage roof. Voonder laughed and hopped out of the carriage. Outside, a sullen dusk light coated the desert plains. The moon was a bright orb in the cloudless sky. The temperature had dropped considerably—there was now a breezy chill blowing in, and their breath came out in vapour.

Eli rolled the gunk out of his eyes and stumbled out after Voonder, more exhausted than before he'd slept. He was just about to

ask Voonder if there was any water, but he spotted Zarmn's tomb. Their destination.

One word came to mind: Unimpressive. A rectangular stone building, no bigger than a drainage pipe, was plotted into the sand. Its edges were worn away, giving it a ruinous look. Twenty yards away, across the breezy sands, was a stone cabin on a brick foundation. Outside it was a well and the charred remains of what looked like a barbeque.

'The sentinels,' said Eli. 'Where are the sentinels?'

As if to answer his question, a fat humpback goblin limped out of the cabin—the carriage driver. 'Nobody's home!' he said. 'Nobody's home!'

Voonder frowned. 'No one's here to say hello.'

'Where do you think they went?' asked Eli. 'Did they go AWOL?'

'Who knows?' said Voonder. 'At least I won't have to bother with pleasantries. And look—' He pointed to the tomb. Its door, a round slab of stone three inches thick, had been rolled away, exposing its dark gaping entrance. 'They've left the door open for us. Isn't that nice?'

Voonder walked over to the carriage, boots crunching in the sand. The horses, their brown eyes dazed from dehydration, scraped and snorted as he reached into the driver's seat and took out a torch and matches.

'Do you think they've robbed the place?' asked Eli. 'The sentinels?'

'I don't know' said Voonder. 'But we'll go and see, won't we?' He didn't sound too worried. He lit the torch—*flummph!*—brightening the sand in a pool of orange light.

He said to the driver, 'Wait here until I come back. If you see anyone, call down after us.' The driver dutifully nodded, rubbing and blowing into his hands.

He turned to Eli. 'Come on. What are you waiting for?'

It might have been the hellish flicker of the torchlight, or the infernal evil inside him, but there was something expectant in Voonder's gaze. Voonder stood next to the door and ushered Eli to enter.

'After you, Elicious.'

'Actually, Voonder,' said Eli, 'I'd rather *you* go down first.'

Voonder laughed his harsh laugh. The sound rolled across the desert like building thunderhead. 'How *cute*,' he said to the driver. 'He thinks he has a *choice*.' The driver laughed.

Well, it was worth a try.

Eli stood at the entrance, his hands on each side of the opening, like a kid afraid of the Big Slide. This place seemed to lead to the bowels of the earth.

'Do I get a torch?' he asked in a mild voice.

'No,' said Voonder. 'Are you going to move? Or will I have to kick you down?'

He didn't want to get kicked down. He didn't want to *go* down at all—it meant his back would be to Voonder. But what choice did he have?

With a deep breath he stepped down into the dark.

Voonder followed, matching him step for step, his torch illuminating a few feet ahead of him. The stairs seemed to stretch into Hell. How deep did it go? Eli let his clammy hands glide along the smooth marble handrail. As he went deeper, the temperature dropped, cold to make him shiver. He glanced back. Voonder staring two steps above him, wearing a hungry grin. The entrance stood high in the dark, like a door floating in outer space. Then Voonder did something that disturbed Eli. He rolled his red tongue along teeth. Teasing him. But by now the only sounds were Eli's racing heart, footfalls, and the airy sound of silence. He felt fear like this before, fear of the unknown, when he knocked on the orphanage door as a ten-year-old boy. Fear of what would happen to him. He gripped the handrails tight, his palms wet with sweat in spite of the cold. Why he Voonder

holding onto him for so long? Was he going to eat him? Goblins were known for savouring their food, prolonging the moment, making that first bite oh-so sweet. He had travelled with Voonder for two days now and he'd not so much as laid a finger on him. But there was nothing to stop him from lunging into Eli's neck like he had with that Cavallo orphan. There was nothing to stop him from booting Eli down the tomb steps and feasting on the shattered boy he'd find at the bottom. He expected an ambush with every step he took, with every cold breath. But so far he was still alive. When they reached the treasure what would they find? The entrance had been left open and the sentinels had vanished—and it was no advantage to Voonder to lie about their existence. If there was nothing down here, just a cavern devoid of gold, then there was nothing to chain Voonder's madness. He would pounce on Eli, rip him open, tuck in. So Eli had to be prepared. Despite his grogginess, the throbbing bruise on his forehead, his famished body, he had to be prepared to fight for his life. Somehow, he knew that only one of them would leave the tomb alive.

Thirty feet down they finally reached the bottom. Voonder didn't wait—he eagerly brushed past Eli, into a circular room lit only by Voonder's torch. The floor was mosaic, depicting the sun in faded colours. Marble pillars surrounded the room.

In the very centre of the tomb was a raised platform. On it was a stone box.

A coffin. The treasure chest.

Voonder held his torch over its bronze plaque. “Here lies Zarmn, Warlord of the Wilder Clan and loyal friend and ally to his people.” He laughed. ‘What bullshit! ‘Boymeat! Open this up!’ He was choking with excitement.

Eli dreaded what he might find. Then a funny thought occurred to him: he had started off as a working-class boy. He was demoted to orphan. He was promoted to thief, clawed his way to position of con artist, before finally becoming Voonder's hostage.

Hurrah. Now I'm a teenage graverobber.

'Get your ass over here and hurry up!' said Voonder, his voice demonic in the chamber and a thread of spit spooling from his mouth.

Eli hurried and placed his hands on the lid, which was at shoulder-height. Voonder held the torch over the coffin, breathing like a dog.

That torch would make a fine weapon, but he needed Voonder to let go of it.

He pretended to struggle with the lid.

'It's too heavy,' he said. 'I need help.'

Voonder rolled his eyes. 'Do I have to do *everything* myself?' Voonder kept the torch in his hand, placing the heel of his hands on the lid. *Dammit.*

The lid weighed like it'd been glued on. It lid slid askew with a grinding noise and the push and grunted, arms quaking with effort. The smell that wafted out was unreal. Eli covered his nose with his shoulder as he pushed and breathed through his mouth.

Eventually the lid hit the ground with an explosive bang and Eli didn't waste any time looking inside.

He expected one of two things: Zarmn's wizened corpse with no treasure, or Zarmn's wizened corpse with a shitload of treasure.

But neither. Just an empty stone coffin.

Oh shit.

Voonder stared into the empty box with fomenting rage. His head snapped forward. The torch he was holding clattered to the ground and rolled a spotlight along the tomb walls, coming to rest on Zarmn's rotted body which was propped in the corner. As Voonder collapsed to the floor, Eli spun round to face the shadow that attacked them. In the light of the torch, all he could make out was a long coat and a fedora. He didn't have time to react before the butt of a gun slammed into head and, for the second time in two nights, he went out like a light.

Chapter 8

The Finale

When Eli came to he was sitting on the ground, tied to one of the pillars. He felt an aching cut on his forehead. Two torches—not there before—were mounted on the walls, lighting the tomb a fiery red. The Goon was dumping a what looked like a stuffed potato sack among a dozen of them piled beside the entrance, like farmer heading for the market. Except the sacks were filled with gold and hit the ground with a chink.

Eli lolled his head to the right. Five feet away, Voonder was tied to another pillar. The goblin moaned, as if in the throes of a nightmare. It was strange, seeing the almighty Warlord looking so vulnerable.

The Goon dumped another fat sack with the others. Meanwhile Zarmn, evicted from his tomb, watched one wide eye and a slack jaw, his skin like old leather. As the legend went, one half of his head was obliterated from when Voonder attacked him with a mace.

Patting his hands like a labourer, The Goon sighed. ‘That’s the last of that.’

His voice was gruff, gravelly. A smoker’s voice. Just how Eli remembered it.

‘Goon...’ he said. ‘I missed you.’

Eli stared at his own feet, unable to bring himself to look at The Goon. However, he heard him snickering. ‘You were always a little wise-ass, weren’t you?’ he said.

‘It’s you,’ joined Voonder. His eyes were narrow slits. Blood streamed from the gash on his scalp where The Goon had butted him. ‘This boy you sold ... he didn’t match the description. I demand a refund.’

‘Heh, two wise-asses.’

The Goon moved the centre and propped an elbow on Zarmn’s coffin. ‘I’d never thought I’d see the day. The spoiled brat and the unruly joining forces. Was I that bad, Eli? That you had to go downmarket to find another partner?’

‘He’s *not* my partner,’ said Voonder. ‘I’m just holding onto him until I find something more tasty.’

Eli struggled against his rope. He knew it was no good. He was dealing with one of The Goon’s knots, after all.

‘How the hell did you get here?’ asked Eli, more wakened, although there was no force in his words, only resignation. ‘How’d you know about the treasure? Were you following us?’

‘Following *you!*’ said The Goon with a laugh. ‘You were the one following *me!* After I dumped you on that goblin over there, I went to Cavallo—and there you were! I went into an inn to get a drink and—surprise surprise!—I found your handiwork, the murdered slave-hunter in his underground hideout.’

‘Ah yes,’ said Voonder. ‘Good times.’

‘You were in Cavallo?’ said Eli. ‘What were you doing in Cavallo?’

‘I had told you I smelt something funny,’ said Voonder.

The Goon whipped out the blunderbuss and aimed it at Voonder’s head. ‘No more wise cracks,’ he said, ‘Or you’re going to end up like you’re old boss over there. Except you won’t be as pretty.’

Voonder kept grinning. But said nothing.

‘If you weren’t following us,’ said Eli, ‘how you do know about the treasure?’

The Goon rested the blunderbuss on his shoulder. ‘Your little friend told me. That Kid. Dane, was it? Skinny lad. He bumped into me in Savage Forest, just after I dumped you. He was crying to me like a baby. He said he’d tell me about the treasure if I escorted him home. Sensing a fair bargain, I said yes.’

‘Dane?’ said Eli. He never thought he’d hear that name again. ‘He’s still alive?’

‘I don’t know,’ said The Goon. ‘I tied him up in Savage Forest.’

It might’ve been a trick of the light, or of a concussed mind, but The Goon’s appearance had changed over the past two days. His eyes

were vacant, starey, and he'd lost weight. As if greed had literally eaten his soul.

He slotted his gun back in his holster. 'It was a shame it had to go this way, Eli. But you left me no choice. You were spoilt, demanding more than your fair share. Your pocket was getting fatter and fatter and still you wanted more. This is your punishment for being so damn greedy.'

You're one to talk. Lugging a palace's worth of treasure around?

'So that's that, then!' said Eli. 'Our partnership, Goon ... does it really mean that little to you?'

The Goon thought about this for a moment. 'Nope.' He then moved over and nudged one of the bulging sacks with his toe. 'If I change my mind, I can always buy a thousand more of you. Last I checked, there were *plenty* of orphans in Cavallo.'

And to think, Eli once seen this guy a father figure.

'You bastard,' he said. He drew his knees to his chin.

'Now, now, now,' said The Goon. 'Don't get testy. You're forgetting that I'm in a position of power. If I were you, I'd silence that mouth of yours—he fingered his blunderbuss—'or I'll blast it off for you.'

'The sentinels,' said Voonder.

The Goon looked at him. 'I took care of them, what do you think? The Wilder Clan ... you talk tough and act tough, but when it comes to grit of it, you're just a bunch of child-eating cowards. One look at me and off they ran, shitting themselves like monkeys. I shot them in the back. I *could've* let them run, but I didn't.'

If Eli had to come face-to-face with a blunderbuss, he would've ran, shitting himself like a monkey too. That thing was able to stop a raging bull elephant with one shot. The Goon had let him try it, once, and it the shock had knocked Eli to his arse.

The Goon was able to wield it with one hand.

‘Do you know why I didn’t let them run?’ said The Goon. ‘Because I’ve no remorse for your kind. You steal from hard-working merchants, who sweat blood to bring food to the family table. You kill them. You kidnap their children and eat them. I know I’m no saint—I’ve done my crimes in my day—but I do what I have to. A guy’s gotta eat. And I for one have never hurt no kid.’ The Goon was rambling; he must’ve been drinking. ‘At least, I haven’t hurt a kid directly. *You*, on the other hand, *choose* to raid, to kidnap, to kill. That’s why it’s my pleasure leaving you here to rot, you little green *shit*. The children you’ve taken, the father’s you’ve left without sons, the husbands you’ve left without *wives*...’ The Goon was really heating up now. If he were a different person, he might have been crying. ‘Now you can watch me waltz out of here with the Wilder Clan’s money. And there’s nothing you can do about it.’

He bent down to pick up one of his sacks of loot.

‘Wait! Goon!’ said Eli. The Goon paused, not looking in the mood.

Eli’s voice shook when he spoke. ‘T-Take ... Take me with you.’

The Goon had been waiting in ambush only for an hour before Eli and Voonder showed up. He’d killed the sentinels, looted the coffin, Immeasurably rich, he could live a comfortable life anywhere he wanted. He’d thought of returning to Polywerp, reopening the haberdashery business in honour of his family—and purchase immunity from the Polywerp Protection Plan. Perhaps even have a sway in getting it revoked.

And, with his wealth, he could buy Leo Bradley’s head.

And here was Eli, again, wanting to dip his hands into his pockets.

‘No,’ he said, his tone as sharp as an axe.

‘*Please*,’ said Eli. Tears rolled down his eyes. His voice wavered. ‘I wanna forget about everything. I don’t care. You were right. You were right to ditch me with Voonder. And who could blame you? I was spoilt. I’d asked for too much and now I’m paying the price. I’m *sorry*. Please, can we be partners again?’

‘No.’

‘I promise, I’ll be good. I won’t ask for too much. Hell, I won’t even ask for *anything*, you can give me what you think is right. We’d such good times together. It wasn’t all bad, was it? The times with you ... they were the best years of my life and that’s no lie. *Please*, Goon, give me another chance. I want to be friends again.’

If that blunderbuss-wielding bastard really thought Eli was crawling back on all fours, he was dumber than a Kytton Kingdom gorc. Earlier, when The Goon had been ranting at Voonder, Eli slipped out of his boot his trusty lock pick. And now while Eli was kissing The Goon’s ass, begging for a second chance, he slow sawing, behind his drawn knees, at the rope binding to him the pillar. There were three coils to work through, and so far he’d succeeded in fraying one. He needed more time. He needed to keep The Goon talking.

‘Please...’ said Eli.

The Goon had shared his life with Eli for two years. He ate with him, slept in the same room as him; Eli had confided to The Goon, his darkest fears, his dreams, his ambitions. The Goon had also seen Eli at work, and how beautifully he wept crocodile tears. He had fooled royalty, tradesmen, savage tribes into giving what they had.

But he was not fooling The Goon.

‘Save your tears,’ he said ‘Waste them on someone who cares.’

He grabbed a sack in each hand.

‘Don’t!’ cried Eli. ‘Please, take me with you! You can’t—!’

‘Shut up!’ snapped Voonder. ‘Grow some balls already!’ Then, with pure, seething venom, ‘Goon, If you *dare* walk out of here with

even one of those bags, I *swear* I'll be wearing your skin by the end of the night.'

It amused The Goon to see the Voonder reduced to empty threats.

'Watch me get rich,' he said, and began his ascent to freedom.

The Goon carried two gold-stuffed sacks at a time. There were ten sacks to collect, which meant he had to return five times. The stairs were going to cost him two minutes each time.

Therefore, Eli had twenty minutes to saw through the ropes with his lock pick. 'Have you any ideas, boymeat?' said Voonder sorely.

'Umm ... no.' He thought it wiser to keep Voonder in the dark.

Outside, there was the cannon blast of a blunderbuss.

'There goes our ride,' said Voonder. 'Your friend, he's not even going to live long enough to regret this.'

'Why don't you tell him that?' said Eli, sawing furiously at his rope. 'Maybe it'll scare him into letting us go.'

The Goon returned, flexing his fingers and breathing heavy. He didn't even look at Eli as he snatched up another two bags and lumbered back up the steps.

Eli kept sawing.

The Goon returned, grabbed two more sacks and left.

Eli was still on his first coil.

Come on, come on...!

The Goon was still on his third round when the first loop came undone, easing the tension on Eli's chest. He went to work on the second coil, keeping the frayed ends of the first tucked into his stomach.

'What the hell are you up to?' asked Voonder. Eli didn't answer him. It must've looked funny, though: Eli, legs drawn, one arm jerking back and forth. The thought made him laugh. The Goon came and went with another two sacks. There were six sacks left. *There are*

eight sacks of loot on the floor, eight sacks o' loot. Take two up, dump 'em on a truck, now's there's six sack o' loot on the floor. Then there were four sacks left. Then two—and Eli had only finished the second coil of rope. They were taking longer to cut and he knew why—his lock pick was blunting. Of course, it was designed for picking *locks*, not sawing through ropes. This was his last coil, and his arms was aching.

Voonder watched Eli in silence.

It seemed like The Goon had only been gone a second when he came back for final two sacks of loot. If Eli didn't escape now it was Game Over. Kiss Your Ass Goodbye. His already cruel life was coming to a crueller end.

'These are the last of 'em,' said The Goon, breathing so hard Eli hoped he was having a heart attack. He held up the final two bags of treasure with trembling arms.

Eli no longer sawed—he cut under the rope, trying to rip it off with strength alone, as if he were snapping a cord on a parcel. He wet his dry lips, hiding the strain on his sweating face. *Break, break ... break you bastard...*

'It's was fun, Eli,' said The Goon in a tight voice. 'But all good things must come to an end. I should know. Take consolation in knowing that you were the best helper I ever had. Until you turned rotten.' He turned to Voonder. 'I forgot to mention, your driver was a sour-faced grump, so I put him down.'

'You'll pay for this,' said Voonder.

'No,' said The Goon, 'I'll be filthy rich.'

He turned to leave for the final time.

No... no...!

Eli cried out for him to wait, but The Goon ignored him and put his foot on the stairs. Then the rope snapped. The Goon spun round, loot in each hand, knowing what had what had happened. He dropped the sacks—their contents spilling onto the floor, gold coins, rubies, diamonds—and groped for his blunderbuss. But Eli was already on

his feet and was sprinting at The Goon, screaming, lock pick held high above his head. He plunged it into The Goon's neck. The Goon cried out, fumbled his blunderbuss, dropped it. Eli, letting go of the lock pick, left it The Goon's neck like a piece of shrapnel and snatched the blunderbuss from the ground and pointed it at his ex-partner.

It was self-defence—matter of life-or-death. At least, that's what Eli told himself in the before he pulled the trigger. But he knew it wasn't true. The Goon was looking at him with cow eyes with blood gushing from his neck. It was the look of fear. Surprise. Betrayal. He made no attempt to protect himself—his own blunderbuss turned on him, he was as harmless as a child. So it was revenge, not self-defence, that made Eli pull the trigger. He was knocked off his feet as if he'd been pushed. Drowned in the roar of the gunblast were the sounds of his old pal's guts splattering on the wall behind him. On the ground, face speckled with hot blood, Eli stared at the dead body that suddenly lay in front of him.

Vengeance had been served.

And it was true what they said: it was ice-bloody-cold.

Elicious is shaking. He is staring at his hands as if they are not his own. The blunderbuss rests on the floor, at the foot of Zarmn's corpse. The Goon is sprawled in a lake of his own blood, his entrails smeared on the walls like lumpy jam. Briefly, Voonder thinks of the Cavallo orphan he eviscerated only one night ago.

'Bravo, boymeat,' he says. 'I never knew you had it in you.'

Eli's eyes are wide, displaying their full blue colour. Blood is sprinkled all over his white face, his clothing, his bare legs. 'W-why ... did I *do* that?' His voice shakes, but he is not crying.

'Because you had to. We'd die if you didn't.'

Eli slowly finds his feet. His gaze is fixed on The Goon's dead body.

‘Don’t worry,’ says Voonder. ‘It gets easier the second time.’

‘I didn’t *have* to do that,’ he says. ‘I didn’t *have* to...’

‘Bullshit. You *had* to. Now look, we have the treasure all to ourselves. Untie me, and we will share it. I promise.’ But Eli does not even glance at the treasure, the gold and diamonds strewn over the floor like shattered glass. ‘Hurry up, I don’t have all night.’

Eli looks at Voonder with shock-victim eyes, then back at The Goon. He steps around the dead body, like it is not even there. He kneels down, and yanks out the lock pick from its fleshy scabbard.

He crosses to Voonder, wielding it like a two-handed dagger.

‘I should kill you,’ he says.

Voonder only grins. ‘Why would you do that?’

‘Because. For all the people you kill. All the teens and children you enslave. For making my life a living hell.’

‘Don’t be stupid, Elicious. You’re only alive because of me. Any other Warlord would’ve eaten you by now. *I* kept you. *I* spared your life and, because of me, we’ve found the mother lode of treasures. Use your common sense. Put the weapon down.’

Eli shakes his head. ‘No,’ he says with absolutely no conviction. ‘I’m going to kill you. I’m going to take revenge for my family. For every orphan out there wandering the streets because of you and your clan. If it weren’t for you...’ He wipes his welling eyes with his sleeve, smearing blood across his face. ‘If it weren’t for you I’d be somewhere, a better place. Have a job. People wouldn’t look down on me. I wouldn’t’ve to steal food off the streets. I wouldn’t’ve met The Goon. I wouldn’t’ve ... killed somebody. You’ve ruined me, Voonder. And now I’m going to kill you.’

‘Then go ahead, boymeat. I *dare* you.’

Eli’s blue eyes are stony, but his hands tremble. He keeps rambling on: ‘I want you to remember my face Voonder. This is the boy you won’t eat. The boy you won’t enslave. Get a good look at me. I want you to remember it. When you’re down here. Starving to death.’

The boy tosses his little weapon to the side. It lands next to the blunderbuss.

Eli, he has made a mistake. Voonder had watched turn that orc into mince and was proud of the accomplishment. The boy had shown promise. Maybe he had what it took to be the first human member of the Wilder Clan. All he had to do was try and kill Voonder. Prove that he has the malice in him that would let him go back to the Wilder Clan, proudly, as an equal.

But he turns his back to Voonder. He doesn't give the treasure a second thought as he steps around The Goon's dead body and heads for the exit.

Voonder stands up. Coils of rope fall from his body. The boy as made a fatal mistake, turning his back to a Warlord.. As a spindly goblin child, and a member of the Gob Scouts, Voonder had been picked on, believe it or not. They had called him names. *Wussy. Weakling. Shrimp.* While other goblins were off killing teenagers to earn the Savage Hunter's Badge—the mark of goblin adulthood—Voonder was still torturing small animals. The other scout members had laughed, beat him up, hog-tied him, left him in the dirt, told him that he *wasn't good enough* to be a Wilder Clan member and that he should just give up.

Therefore, after Voonder built his reputation of the foundation of dead bodies, he swore never to take shit from anybody.

Also, he had learned how to untie knots.

Voonder stalks after Eli. The boy has his foot on his first step. Voonder calls his name and the boy turns round. His eyes go wide. His face is deadly pale.

'You're too soft,' says Voonder, and lunges forward and bites into the boy's face.

The Epilogue

A bang of something knocked over. Fierce cursing.

Holden raised his head. Sleep time, that blissful period where you drifted into your own goblin-free fantasies, was a precious time to a Wilder Clan slave.

Tonight he was robbed of it. He'd taken Karl's advice to heart and slept with *both* eyes open, allowing himself only to doze off five minutes at a time.

He peered at his glowing digital watch: 3.15 a.m. At this hour most of the Wilder Clan—and their slaves—were in bed. The only ones who sat up were the watchmen, the insomniacs and, of course, the drunks.

The cursing, the bitter grumbles grew louder, more intense.

They were coming from the corridor outside.

Voonder's bedroom was in a separate zone from the rest of the clan, reserved for only his personal slaves and closest friends. It was never like Larcomn, Hanz or Rawrs to stagger back to their rooms this late. And it was forbidden for any other goblin to wander around here without good reason.

Holden sat up on his bed, hair prickling on the back of his neck.

It's Karl, I know it is. Please, God, no...

The door handle twisted, screeched. Whoever was on the other side pushed, but found the door locked. They cursed. Suddenly, the door boomed, shook on its hinges, the sound deafening in the dead of night. Holden out of bed in his shorts, his heart in his mouth. He had locked the door as a precaution.

He wished he hadn't now. It only fanned Karl's rage.

There was no other way out of the room. Holden searched for somewhere to hide, using green digital light of his watch to illuminate the dark. Under the bed was obvious—the idiot's first choice and where the murderers first looked. He groped through room, his bare feet whispering on Voonder's carpet, and found the knobs of the wardrobe. He opened the doors, crammed himself inside and eased the door closed. Above him, coat hangers rattled like bones.

The door burst open, and the hate-filled breathing was very real and in the room. Karl was carrying a torch—it shone between the doors of the wardrobe. Karl pounded across the carpet. ‘Where are ye? Where are ye?’ Holden, bracing himself, shaking violently, allowing himself small gasps of air. *This is it. Today, I’m going to die.*

He listened as Voonder’s room was ripped apart. Trashed. He heard the bed being dragged aside and overturned. It was a matter of time before he searched the wardrobe, which was made of wood like a huge treasure chest.

Footsteps pounded dangerously close. As he had feared—as he’d expected—the doors flung open and Karl was standing with the hilt of the torch in his mouth like he were a hellish dog playing a game of fetch. ‘Found ya!’ He took the torch out of his mouth and reached for Holden with his free hand.

Holden was on the ground, being dragged by his hair, across the carpet, outside of the room, along the stone corridor. He didn’t cry, he wasn’t giving Karl the satisfaction. He shouted, ‘Help! Help!’ but all that came out was a choked whisper. It was like a nightmare where you were being hunted and couldn’t scream.

It seemed like both an instant and eternity had passed when Karl hoisted Holden up and slammed him onto something hard and wooden, something like a raft, but flat. He looked ahead and saw in the red torchlight rows of shining knives, axes, grinders, saws, hanging by their handles on the wall. He was in the kitchen, on the chopping board.

He tried to flounder off the table, but Karl’s dazed him with a punch to the head. He saw stars. With swaying vision he watched Karl seize a cleaver—the thing they used to hack off limbs—and he tried to flounder again. But Karl pinned him down with his elbow, face-up, as he held the torch in one hand and raised the cleaver with the other. He leaned into Holden’s face, his breath reeking of blood liqueur. ‘I’m gonna do what every other goblin has been afraid to do. Stay still, and it’ll be over before you know it.’

Holden screamed now. He wet himself. He didn't care who heard him. He screamed like a child. Karl rolled him over on his belly and pressed his face into the blood-stained wood, waiting for feel of metal hacking through bone.

Then he heard a voice. To Holden, there was no holier sound.

'What the hell are you doing!' said Voonder.

Karl lifted his weight off Holden. Holden looked over his shoulder, his face stained with tears and snot, and saw Voonder. He was a shadow against the a backlight, like a hero in some cowboy movie.

'Voonder!' said Karl. The cleaver clattered on the ground, but he kept the torch in his hand. 'N-Nothing! I just...'

He tried to kill me! thought Holden frantically, but he was too shaken with fear. Voonder stepped into the kitchen, revealing himself in the torch light. He looked like he'd just come back from a long-haul vacation. But apart from that, he hadn't changed.

Except he was livid.

'I was just gonna...' said Karl in a tight voice. But he let it go and finished with a meek shrug, hiding his guilt behind a blank face.

Voonder knelt down. He picked up the cleaver, toyed with it in his hand.

'He kicked a guard yesterday,' said Karl. 'This was his punishment. Hanz told me to do it.' With each lie his tone grew in confidence. 'He said I was to execute him tomorrow for your breakfast. He said you'd like that.'

Stop lying! thought Holden.

Voonder studied the cleaver. He rubbed his thumb along the blade. Karl opened his mouth to speak, but Voonder's upper lip curled into a snarl, and with a barbaric shout brought the cleaver down into Karl's head. It sunk a wet crack. Blood splattered Voonder's face.

He wrenched the axe free and, with the delayed response of a cartoon, Karl dropped the torch and flumped to the ground.

Voonder leaned over Holden. He put a hand on his trembling shoulder. 'It's okay. Voonder's here.' He smiled. His teeth were brown with dried blood. 'We're rich now, Holden. But don't worry. You're still my favourite treasure.'

The End