

**Gwern and Nhiasse the Faerie are at a stone circle known as The King's Men (Gwern has just told the story of how the stones got their name).**

**She has brought him here for a meeting that the Faeries have arranged with a representative of the Goblins, keepers of secrets, who know where lost things hide, in the hope that they will help his search for the lost head of Bran the Blessed.**

Nhiasse feasted on seeds and air. 'He knows we are here,' she said. 'If he won't show himself tonight, fear or caution has defeated curiosity.'

There is no making a Goblin act against his will, nor from pure kindness. They are motivated by shameless self-interest that some call greed, and if you have no payment to offer you need a promise or a curse to hold. I had nothing of value save possibly Ewan's eyestone, and that I would not part with. I might conjure a curse, but if I could not make the Goblinner folk my friends, I didn't need them as my enemy.

The Goblinner's weakness is curiosity. Sometimes it is pure and untainted, more frequently it peers through an avaricious eye. Their redeeming trait is honesty. A Goblin can no more lie or break a promise than I could stop taking warmth from the ground or Nhiasse could stop floating on air.

Their honesty makes them perfect guardians of wealth and secrets, but it does not mean you can trust their goodwill, nor that dealing with them is straightforward. Rather than lie, a Goblin will remain silent, or more likely tell an unneeded and misleading truth. There are better means of trickery than outright lies, as any jester knows.

I sat just outside the ring of stones. The King's Men gazed inwards, facing each other across the circle. Nhiasse hovered at my shoulder, then fluttered hither and thither, hoping to spot any Goblin before he sprang upon us from a darkness of his own.

It takes skill to see a Goblin who doesn't wish to be seen, and Nhiasse, it turned out, was not practiced. I heard his cackle first, from behind me. I turned, and saw nothing, then the cackle repeated from where I'd been looking before, inside the circle. I turned back, and a form sprang from the top of one of the stones, and disappeared, to reappear atop the stone furthest from me. He was smaller than most men, and lean. I doubt he weighed more than one of my legs. His skin, dark and leathery, was almost indistinguishable from his clothes. He wasn't quite invisible, but black against the night's black, he could surely be so if he chose. He could shapeshift too, Ewan had said, though whether that meant he could become an ant or an elephant, a man or an Elf, or simply a re-formed Goblin, I had no idea. His big eyes looked at me, and small pointed ears like a cat's, high on his head, listened. He laughed again, showing white teeth. His ears weren't the only sharp part of him.

I remained squatting as Nhiasse ventured closer. 'I have brought Gwern of the Gog, as Melusine promised.'

'The Gog left many lifetimes ago,' he said. His voice crackled harshly. If a goose argued with a crow, they would sound sweeter than he. 'Do they have a right to return?'

'I am Gwern,' I said, 'And my right to be in Albion is no less than yours.'

'We were here before it was Albion,' he said.

'As were we. You know who I am. Who are you?'

'You do not get to know my name.'

Knowing a soul's name is the first step to doing business with him, as well as controlling him. A Goblin will always give a false name if he can. He will say 'I am called Blacktooth' when his name was Greenhand, having made sure to ask a friend to call him Blacktooth one time just to make it true. A Goblin might carry five or six words he has been called by, only one of which is his name.

At least this one had made it clear where I stood. His name, I

would have to earn. And after I'd learned it, I would never see him again. Any further dealings with his people would be conducted with another Goblin, or this one in a different guise; either way, we would start the game over.

'Where have you come from?' he asked.

'I have come from mountains far away, where the Gog have lived since Jack chased us out of Albion.'

'Jack!' he croaked, and laughed. 'You should never have made an enemy of Jack.'

'He was never our enemy, until we were his. We were too big, too dangerous in his eyes. Too protective of the earth.'

He grunted at this truth.

'I have said where I came from. Now tell me where you come from.' I saw Nhiasse out of the corner of my eye, nodding approval that what I gave, I asked for in return.

He growled a sound from a throat made of treebark. 'Dhun Gherau,' he said, which had no meaning for me. 'Why come you here?'

'I will tell you, then you will tell me your true name,' I said. 'Agreed?' Nhiasse nodded again.

'Agreed,' he said.

'By you, not by her.' He might say that it was Nhiasse, not he, who had agreed to the deal. 'Say it.'

He chuckled like a duck. 'You tell me your reason to be here. Then I will tell you my true name.'

Show trust, Ewan had said, and a Goblin will be honest. I didn't see any trick he might use to nullify his promise, so I told him about the Gog in the faraway mountains, our hidden valley, and how we felt every inch of our distance from home. I kept the lack of children and the incursions of men to myself. 'I am come to Albion to seek the head of Bran the Blessed, who promised to watch over his people.'

Drant growled like a guard dog seeing a stranger open its master's gate.

Show trust, and courtesy. ‘And I humbly ask the help of the Goblinner, keepers of secrets, protectors of dark places, shapeshifters, who were-’

It was as if I had plunged a dagger into his stomach and twisted it. The growl became a snarl, lancing at me from the back of his throat, and the snarl became a howl. He leapt off his stone and bounded to me, raking the air with claws he’d hidden before. I recoiled, putting my arms up for protection.

He came closer, hissing. I had no idea what brought such venom. He spat out his name, ‘Drant,’ and sprang over my head. I turned to see him disappear into darkness, vanishing before he landed.

‘What happened?’ I said to Nhiasse.

‘You insulted him. Sorely.’

But I’d done my best to be respectful and polite. ‘I did?’

‘Shapeshifting,’ she said. ‘Goblins lost that power generations ago. It is not to be spoken of.’

Ewan had misled me, and the folk who offered the best way of finding what is lost, they’d not aid me now.

‘One thing is clear,’ she said. ‘His reaction when you said ‘Bran’ means the name is meaningful to him, and troubling.’

‘Why would that be?’

‘You’ll never get the chance to ask.’

She was right. Could I have spoken differently? I didn’t see what I might have said other than the truth.

‘But this is good,’ Nhiasse said. ‘He would not be upset by something he knows no longer survives.’

She was right. Drant’s reaction told me that Bran’s head was not lost to the world. I had hope.