



the battle of
dusk and dawn

V. A. JEFFREY

THE BATTLE OF DUSK AND DAWN

A Secret Doorway Tale: Book 6

By V. A. Jeffrey

Book cover design by V. A. Jeffrey

Copyright 2012

Prologue

Goblins.

There are many kinds of goblins in the world, one of those kinds being hobgoblins. Hobgoblins are at the core of this particular story so this brief prologue will focus mostly on them.

They can be a mischievous bunch and *not* in a good way. They are often said to be spiteful, rude even cruel and that they love to hold grudges over the smallest absurdities. All of this is basically true. Sometimes clustered in tribes (depending on where they hail from) or in rare cases even families, they are usually thought to be solitary beings and have been the bane of human domestic existence for as long as anyone cares to remember.

Often when strange sounds and evil smells erupt in one's house after a night of hobgoblin mischief – usually in the kitchen – it is thought to be the work of the usual suspects such as mice, roaches or, Lord forbid, rats! However, it can just as easily be hobgoblins. Hobgoblins, as a general rule, enjoy being wicked and can be a terrible pain in the backside but they do not have much power beyond being a nuisance. After all, why would a self-respecting goblin of any sort do anything constructive? However, many hobgoblins all packed in together with nothing constructive to do can get up to all sorts of wickedness. . .

There were rows upon rows of antique bottles; bottles of many colors, shapes and sizes. There were also endless shelves of bone china with painted gold rims, black round things that people called 'records', old, silk dolls, frilly pinafores and frocks and a thousand other things that beckoned to her. There were even ancient looking brass lamps and great, iron ceiling fixtures. This was mama's favorite antique shop and it had a tea house attached on the other side where they served tea in silk tea bags. Anne, mama and grandma Veronica were picking up a few things, replacing the wreckage found when they'd come back from their beach trip. At least the house was no longer in disarray, however, everyone was still out of sorts over the entire matter. Except grandma Veronica. She seemed to float above it all and knew how to smooth things over with her gentle demeanor and the right, soothing word at the right time.

Anne had been promised a gift from the antique shop and she busied herself looking through many treasures. She eventually found a white wooden music box with a tiny, white porcelain ballerina that danced in front of a clouded mirror. Grandma had chosen a Wedgwood White cake stand and mama had gathered some delicate vases and a new set of dinnerware.

On the way to the register Anne saw a large bowl full of shiny, colorful stones and among them were two small moonstones. She picked these out of the bowl. If she would only get one thing, it would be the moonstones. In fact, she wanted her ring back. And her armor and her bag! But they were gone. Even her new toys didn't make her happy. Nothing hurt as much as losing something that was irreplaceable. The moonstones would do, for now. She felt a sinking discontent. An emotion that crept along the edges of her anger at the hobgoblins' violation. It was well to get new things but the destruction and the loss of things that were important to her and to her family felt like a stab of broken glass in her stomach. A few weeks had passed. In fact, it was summer break already, though actual summer was still a few days away. She kept thinking of her ring that grandma Barbara had given her. The one with the citrine jewel set in it by the Summer Queen herself! It felt as if someone had stolen away her heart. She fought back tears of anger. She saw grandma glance at her and she quickly wiped her face.

After paying for their items and having them wrapped in volumes of tissue and newspaper they made their way up to the tea house. As mama ordered for them Anne and grandma sat down at a table overlooking the shop downstairs.

"What's wrong little one?"

"Nothing."

"The same nothing that ruined your room?" Asked grandma. Anne heaved a sigh.

"Yeah. I guess."

"Whatever gremlins were involved, remember that everyone reaps what they sow in the end."

"Yeah. I know."

"Bad things happen. Sometimes good can come of it in the end. Time will pass and it won't seem as scary as it does now. Come, here's your mama with our drinks. How about you and I go for ice cream floats and talk this over?" Anne smiled eagerly. Mama set three iced teas on the table.

"We still have no real idea where this incident came from or why." Said mama.

"It's strange, Lilly. So strange. Makes no sense. Nothing was stolen, you say?"

"Nothing." But this wasn't true. Anne knew that this was a direct attack on her and by extension, her family. She was sure it could happen again, especially considering what she and Jordan had gotten away with under the nose of the Fairy King and his minions. Things had been tense at home for some time. Lot's of money had been spent to replace or fix the damage. Dad was always grumbling about too much money being spent and this kept both of her parents in a less than pleasant mood. Even the little koi fish had been made to pay for her adventure to the Dark Mountain. What if she'd had a cat or a dog? She shuddered to think of what might have happened.

Later, they dropped mama off and went for ice cream and a talk.

"During times like these it's good to be around those who love you, little one." Said grandma. Anne did feel better after tucking into a peanut butter float. She thought long and hard on what to say for she had something important that she hadn't told anyone in her family.

"Grandma, do you believe in goblins?"

"Goblins? My goodness. What do you mean when you say *goblins*?"

"I mean bad creatures that like to cause trouble. It was goblins that did this, not raccoons." At this, grandma was silent for a little while, eating her ice cream.

"I knew it wasn't raccoons, honey. But raccoons seemed like a rational explanation. Why goblins? Why would they do this?"

"They stole something important from a friend and I took it back from them and that made them mad. So they got revenge." Grandma raised her brow at this and just when Anne thought she'd made a mistake by confiding in her, grandma spoke.

"Anne, I have seen many things, ordinary and unusual in this world. Your story does not surprise me at all. I encountered

one once and boy was he an ugly son-of-a-gun! Ugly inside and out!” Grandma waved her hands in the air to gesture her disgust. “I’ll tell you about him someday.”

“You actually met one?” Anne was surprised. Grandma nodded.

“Wow!” Anne breathed a sigh of great relief. At least grandma didn’t think something was wrong with her. “However, revenge can turn into never-ending feuding. Feuds can get bloody and they can last forever. Do you want revenge?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. Just remember, revenge can get out of control. Did they steal anything from you?” Anne nodded.

“My ring that grandma Barbara gave me and a lot of other things.”

“So, you did something to help another person and because of that you are under attack. Look at it like this, it can make you a stronger person.”

“I don’t feel stronger right now.” Anne said.

“In the beginning you usually don’t. It’s important to remember what this is. This is not punishment, it’s a form of *persecution*. There are bad forces in the world that do not want to see good things happen and do not want justice to prevail. They are always looking to cause trouble. How you react to it can either weaken you or strengthen you.” Grandma took her hand and stared meaningfully at her.

“Revenge is not what’s important here, Anne. Do not let this prevent you from helping others. Do not let the actions of monsters like this frighten you into silence. You are never alone. You have your family for strength, always. They would like nothing more than to see you give up or become afraid of them. Do not!” *Do not be frightened. I will not be frightened.* Anne chanted silently. They finished their ice cream.

“I’m glad I can talk to you, grandma.”

“So am I. Remember, there is strength and help in many places of the world when you are having a trial.”

“I know grandma. I know.”

After helping mama with making preserves Anne went out to the backyard to the pond. The koi fish pond had been repaired and the fish replaced. She lay on the paved stone rim, stretching out her arms and putting her hands on the warm grass. She dangled her feet in the cool water and thought of the first koi fish that once swam here. It was nice to have the new ones but the old ones could not be replaced. They hadn't deserved to be torn apart. The goblins hadn't even bothered to really eat them. They just killed them and left them. This thought dampened her feelings of happiness over summer break. However, there were things to be happy for.

She'd have all summer to play. There was writing camp later but that wasn't real work, that was fun. Watching the thin, crystal clouds high in the sky float by and feeling the hot sun on her face this late morning she thought about her conversation with grandma Veronica. Something needed to be done. Like grandma had said, it wouldn't do to sit around and be afraid. That's probably what Stinkthief wanted and she was sure Stinkthief was behind the wreckage. She still wanted revenge though. The problem was, no doorway had opened up recently and she didn't know how to open one herself. Yet. She hadn't even seen the ginger cat. Zi was probably very busy. And he usually showed up right when she needed him. She felt a nibbling on one of her toes, then on several of them. The tickling made her sit up and peer into the water. Dad had bought even more fish this time and they were all so pretty, their scales glistening and rippling with many colors under the water. She had not even given the previous fish names and these did not have names either. When she lifted her legs out of the water they quickly swam away from the surface. She splashed the water playfully, bringing up a light spray of cool water over her face. Something larger than a koi fish was staring up at her from the pond. She thought at first that it might have been her imagination but then it swam up and crowned at the surface under the tiny waterfall. It cooed and gurgled at her, then moved closer, diving under and flipping its bright green tail. Its head appeared just above the surface again.

It was a baby mermaid!

As soon she tried to reach out and touch the baby, it disappeared beneath the surface. Just then she heard someone call her name. It was Jordan.

"Hey, what's up?" He was hopping along on his bike by the back fence. Anne ran to the fence careful to avoid stepping into the thorny blackberry bushes.

"Actually, some weird stuff. . ." She glanced over at the koi pond.

"Stuff like what?"

"We got back from the beach last month, right after you and I went to Other Land, and when we got back our house was trashed! Did you see anything strange too?" At this Jordan's face turned white and he stood still, nearly falling off his bike.

"Yes! We heard strange noises in the house. For a couple of weeks actually. Every morning we would find something broken. At first we thought it was the dog but he never breaks anything. But Tiger would bark wildly nearly all night long in the backyard so we finally brought him inside so the neighbors would stop complaining. One night we heard Tiger growling ferociously. He was so angry that he sounded like a bear or some werewolf. It was weird. It even scared my dad and he isn't scared of anything. Then we heard a lot of noise and what sounded like Tiger fighting with some animal and then Tiger yelped like he was hurt. We all ran downstairs and saw Tiger lying in the floor in a pool of blood. He had a nasty wound on his side but he also had a limb in his mouth!"

"A limb?"

"Yup. My mom and dad had no idea what it was. They thought it was opossum or a massive mutant rat that got in the house but I'm telling you, it was a goblin arm!" Jordan lowered his voice.

"They hurt your dog?"

"Yes. He's ok now. We took him to the animal hospital that night."

"That's horrible! We can't let them get away with that! They stole my leather bag full of objects and even my silver ring. I'm so glad I don't have a pet. "

"Well, nothing was stolen at my house. I still have my bow and arrows. What do you think we should do?"

"We can't let it scare us. That's what they want. I'm going back. But I don't have the things I need. Otherwise, you could just follow me. I'll have to figure something out."

"Actually, I've got a key! Made of chicken bone from a fairy that turns into a purple dragonfly. I just have to find a doorway now."

"You have your own key? That's great!" Which made her feel even worse. She felt her fortunes falling while his were rising. Sadness and frustration was overwhelming her again. And a little jealousy.

"That was Mera. I met her once."

"Yup. That's her name! We'll talk soon. I have swim lessons later. I'm definitely going back when I can find a way in!"

"If you find a doorway that opens, let me know. I'm going back to find Stinkthief! He's got to be behind this!"

"He almost killed my dog! Stinkthief will pay!" Said Jordan. He held his hand out and she high-fived him and he rode off. Just as Anne was feeling that Life was against her she remembered that another way in had just opened. She went back to the pond. The fish were swimming along happily, their scales shining in the reflected sunlight. A faint light source

emanated from deep below. Anne was delighted. The merbabe was gone but it had been there. And then she wondered, *whose limb did Tiger bite off anyway?*

She awoke from a barely remembered dream. One that led her through floating ribbons of color and gentle faces that sang strange lullabies to her. Lying in bed she gazed at the replacement bag that she'd managed to fish out of the basement. It was a rather nice bag. Smaller than her other one, slightly newer looking but it wasn't her *real* bag. What could she do?

The moon was high and full and its milky light bathed her bedroom. A light breeze fluttered the curtains. She yawned and turned over and tried to go back to sleep. There was a strange noise outside. At first she thought she'd imagined it. She froze, straining to listen. Not hearing anything else she closed her eyes. Then it came again.

"Aaayeee! Aaayeee!" Then there was a squeaking sound after it, like a dolphin's call. Anne sat up and went to the window. The soft wavering light she'd seen in the koi pond earlier was there. She only had on her night gown but it was far too hot to put on more clothes. Still, she stuffed a light sweater into her new bag along with her hammer and her two new moonstones and made her way silently down the stairs.

"Zi?" She whispered. She made her way towards the kitchen and peered out of the back door window. From there the light was even brighter. She carefully and quietly unlocked the door and pushed open the screen door.

"Zi?" She carefully closed the screen door.

"Aaayee! Aaayee!" The voice called. It certainly wasn't Zi. *Maybe the merbabe came back?* The water in the pond was rising and falling in waves. Many colors rippled in thin curtains of light; red, orange, blue, green and violet. She crept closer to the edge of the water and looked in. Among the fish were other creatures. There, right in the middle of the group was the little mermaid baby. She swam to the surface and poked her head out from the water. Then one of the other creatures swam to the surface, a mermaid. She had long purple hair, a purple tail and yellow patterns over her body. She beckoned for Anne to come into the water and the baby squealed and gurgled.

Do not worry. You will not drown if you swim with us. Come with us, Anne, and we will take you to the shores of Other Land. She could hear the voice of the mermaid in her head.

"But how did you know?"

My babe was sent to seek you out and show you a way back in.

Anne closed the flap down on her bag and slipped into the water. Hands took her up gently and the merbabe squealed happily. Anne sank into the pond, finally submerged and she could see the bottom. Below the stone walls of the pond at the bottom there was a swirling vortex of color. She could see the koi fish darting about as the school of mermaids and mermen took her down with them through the vortex. They were beautiful, colorful and graceful in their movements. They held her tightly in their circle as their long, graceful tails and fins swayed in the water.

Anne felt her lungs fill with water and then – she could breath as if she had gills all along. They traveled far down and then out of the tunneling vortex where they reached an open sea. They swam over vast underwater forests of trees and seaweed, mountains and valleys. Anne caught glimpses of mighty sea dragons, a giant squid, schools of fish and seahorses, castles of whale bones and corals and burly mermen holding huge conch shells and swimming to and fro around the coral palaces.

They swam until finally the ground became higher as they floated to the shore. The mother of the baby turned to Anne.

You may thank our Lady Mother, Lady Pearl. She heard your song-desire in your dreams to come back.

They took her to the surface where she could see the shoreline of a long, white sandy beach. It was the southern edge of the southern forests.

Our realm ends here, Anne. Perhaps one day you can visit us. So long and may fortune lift you upon its waves.

She felt many hands and the tide pushing and carrying her toward to the beach. The merbabe cooed and the merpeople said their farewells as Anne floated on the tide to the shore.

A ways off she could see the tall bloodwoods and blackwoods along the edge of the beach. It was just before dawn and the horizon was a series of color bands fading into each other, dusky rose, violet and midnight blue near the crown of the sky. The stars glittered like polished jewels, the air was warm and all was quiet except the lapping waters along the shore. The white sands sparkled faintly. She squeezed as much water as she could from her hair and gown and wiped the sand from her legs. Then she started off. To the west she could see Old Tree in the distance, standing like a fulcrum point in the very center of the universe. However, Old Tree did not tell the time and she had no time piece and no Way Wanderer. Listening and watching carefully she made her way into the woods towards Old Tree, thinking that she might find Zi or even Mera. If she didn't bump into anyone she knew she might ask Old Tree, if Old Tree was even awake. If not, she would think of something. Walking through the forest without a clear pathway was hard work and after a long while she was out of breath. Anne sat under a wide fern frond to rest, watching a few fireflies flit away when she heard the noise of many feet coming towards her hiding place. Staying as quiet as a fox pup she watched and waited, putting her hand in her bag to grab hold of *Star* at any moment. She was ready when they came close to her hiding place. She recognized one of them. *Them* being a troupe of brownies, that is. One of them had pale, blonde pigtails. It was the girl she recognized with Mortimer's troupe at the Mirrored Lake. They looked like scouts on a mission. Wondering whether or not she should come out of hiding she immediately found that this was unnecessary. One of them, the one in pigtails, sensed her presence and they went searching

around the bush. The fern frond was pushed away and then there was a very surprised look.

“Anne! I know you! What are you doing hiding here? What brings you out this way?”

“Goblins.”

“Goblins?” They all exclaimed.

“They attacked my home and stole some important things from me.”

“You came here because they stole a few trinkets?” Asked one of them snidely.

“They weren't trinkets.” She said. He made a face but said nothing.

“Gandy, are you saying that we have a right to be angry because the goblins wrecked and stole what is ours but when it happens to mortals it doesn't matter?” She asked. He merely shrugged. She rolled her eyes.

“Anyway, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Pilly and this here is Doran. Come with us, Anne. We are on our way home. Or what we call home, for now.” The others seemed curious about her. Except Gandy, who stood apart from the rest of the group.

“You see, we've been waging a war with the hobgoblins all spring. They've taken over our homes, especially Knoll Hilly. Knoll Hilly is the place where all brownies would gather during important times during a season. The place where the Grand Toadstool stands. Most of us had family who once lived there long ago and it was always the brownie homeland since The Beginning.”

“The beginning?”

“Our ancestral place allowed by the First Law. The hobgoblins pushed all brownies out. Greedy, lazy rats!”

“They won't build places of their own, they just steal from others.” Said Doran.

“They plan to steal all of the surrounding places where we live. Places like The Mirrored Lake.” Said Pilly. Anne gasped.

“You can't let them ruin the lake! Not again! Isn't that part of your home too?” They all nodded.

“Once, long ago,” Said Pilly, “giants came tromping through the land. They were traveling to the mountains. They were eating great big apples and pears – for you see, back then fruit was as big as boulders and the trees they grew from as big as Old Tree – and they spit the seeds out. Some of those seeds fell upon the earth near a large clearing in the middle of the southern forests, between the western forests and the sea. Over time the seeds became so hard and calcified that they became like rocks. We called them mounds. Brownies love rock-filled places, so many brownies came to dwell in that place. Great Old Knoll, a brownie as big and powerful as a goblin led the first group there and called it Knoll Hilly, a place for us all to live or travel to during festivals and it was our home until the hobgoblins came.” Doran spoke up again.

“You see, our ancestral home stretches from Knoll Hilly to the edge of the southern forests and even to the Mirrored Lake. We do not rule the land the way others might rule over land but we lived there in peace with other creatures.”

“Goblins do not understand peace. They do not like it.” Said Pilly.

“Then we will give them what they like, a sound whipping until they get the point.” Snapped Gandy. The others murmured in agreement.

“Goblins are a vengeful race. What did you do to attract their notice, Anne?” Asked Pilly.

“Well, one hobgoblin in particular, who I first saw at the Dark Mountain fortress, stole some important golden objects for the Fairy King. He was planning something very bad with those objects. Jordan and I got them back. After that, they attacked my home.”

“So it was *you* that was the cause of the Fairy King's wrath a moon ago! You and that other meddling mortal child!” Gandy's tone was so venomous that Anne took a step back.

“Gandy! Would you rather the Fairy King be able to fulfill his plan?” Asked Doran.

“I would rather mortals stay out of fairy business! Who knows how many fairy folk died that day because of them?”

“Who knows how many more would have died if they hadn't thwarted him!” Snapped Doran. Pilly waved them both to silence.

“Day is coming and it will soon be time for us to mount another attack. Come with us, Anne. We would be glad of your help.”

“I'm glad to give it.” Pilly took her hand and she marched along with them. She found the sullen one staring hard at her. When she tried to make eye contact with him, he scowled and turned away.

They met up with another troupe headed by a brownie named Cori.

"How goes it Cori? What did you see? How much damage?"

"They've been busy last night. Stinkthief was with them again."

"Stinkthief?" Cried Anne. Cori gave her a strange look but continued on.

"He's the goblin chief's right-hand hobgoblin. Morvul's forces have been spreading their kind farther and farther out.

They have destroyed the rock vale where my family used to live. Some strange thing they've been using recently. It destroys the very ground, crumbles rock and plant. Nothing living remains. It's some new weapon they have." They all cried out in anger and dismay.

"It's not fair!" Gandy cried.

"Do not worry." Said Pilly. "Mortimer has a weapon of his own."

"Indeed, I do." It was Mortimer, appearing out of the crowd.

"I'm glad to see you again, Anne. We have met another child. He is here too, to seek revenge. It seems we all have a score to settle with the hobgoblins."

The troupes made their way to their newest home base, a group of hidden sites under a mass of large moss covered rock formations in a small clearing. Each rock had a doorway that led down into a shallow tunnel with a roof thatched with moss or a thick roof of leaves and vines and brambles. Between each rock was either a large mushroom or a rash of tiny mushrooms. There were brownie guards standing at every rock. They all filed inside one of these rock tunnels.

The tunnel had many rooms that ringed it on either side. Heated rocks kept each room warm and were used for cooking or drying and at the end of the tunnel was a wide room, dome-shaped with a thatched roof. The room itself was just under the ground, the roof a round sphere-like structure, like a vegetable igloo sitting on the ground. In this room was a long, stone table made of slabs of rock. All around the room were primitive weapons stacked in piles; slingshots, bows and arrows, clubs. At the end of the room was a trapdoor that led to a hole deeper under ground. On top of the table and along its length were piled many crudely drawn maps and boards with stick figurines either painted green or black. Anne guessed the black ones were hobgoblins and where they had established themselves or taken over brownie land. She watched as a brownie moved a bunch of the green figurines from a small part on the board and added goblin figurines. Things did not look good there!

This was the war room. Brownies were busy studying the maps and the boards and talking amongst themselves. Mortimer approached her.

"This is one of many rooms set up for studying how to take back Knoll Hilly and the surrounding ancestral places."

"So, they chased you all out of your homes?"

"Yes, long ago. Morvul's great-grandfather, Eruvul the Grotesque, he was the one who started it all, the stealing of our homes and haunts. The Takeover it is called. We brownies have always been peaceful, until recently. The goblins just came in relentless waves, burning and destroying everything in sight, even killing some of our folk. They pushed everyone out. They continue to push us farther out, as if they want us to disappear."

"Why?"

"They do not create anything for themselves, only take what others have. They are bullies. It is in their nature. We don't like to fight but they have left us with little choice now."

"But we have a secret weapon now, don't we Mortimer?" Said Pilly excitedly. Mortimer grinned with pride.

"What weapon?" Asked Anne.

"We don't know her!" Said Gandy. "Why tell her something so important?"

"You do not know her. I know her well enough. Anne, this weapon will change our fortunes in this war."

"If the goblins don't destroy the land first." Said Doran.

"Will you fight with us? In my troupe, Anne? We could use your help!" Said Pilly.

"Of course!"

"Everyone, we have planning to do. To the table!" Mortimer shouted above all the voices. Everyone gathered around the stone table.

"It may have gotten around already but we found out from Cori that the hobgoblins have taken over the vale and have sown some strange poison over the land, destroying every living thing there. We don't know whether this damage is permanent or not but we will put a stop to it."

"Some new weapon they have, isn't it?" Said someone worriedly.

"Yes, a new weapon. Where from? We don't know yet. Stinkthief was once in league with the Fairy King who has many strange potions and other things hidden in his fortress. It may have come from there. We will be making a surprise attack. They struck at night, as they always do while we gathered secret information. The pixies have found a way into Knoll Hilly. All we must do to retake it and the surrounding areas is hem the hobgoblins in. Their defenses recently have been very relaxed. Let us hope they continue on in their laziness." A boastful cheer rose up from the huge crowd around him.

After an hour of studying the plans and the maps full of confusing looking tunnels, which were incomprehensible to Anne's eye, they geared up with weapons and gathered in several troupes, then filed out of the war room ready for battle.

"Pilly, what is this secret weapon?" Asked Anne amidst the activity.

"A bomb." Anne's eyes widened in surprise.

"You guys have a bomb?"

"Yes. We've just learned how to make them. One of ours learned how to make them from a Blackroot, who learned it from one of the King's alchemists." Anne gulped hard.

"How do you make them?"

"We use moonstones." Pilly went to the weapons' stash to choose a club. Anne felt her stomach drop. *So that was why Mortimer needed a moonstone from Lady Grey's hoard.* She thought unhappily. Immediately her thoughts turned to the moonstones in her pocket. Secretly she took them out to look at them for a few seconds, their faint shine so delicate. *What's in a moonstone that can create a bomb?* She wondered. From the corner of her eye she saw someone was watching and she quickly stuck them back in her pocket.

The troupes, all in tunics and vests of woven grasses moved like a small forest of bushes. Rays of sunlight glimmered through the wide shade of the bloodwoods and blackwoods. They sneaked and wound through the woods like salamanders along the forest floor. A host of pixies had joined the troupes, headed by Lito.

Lito sought Anne and stayed close to her. A few pixies flew ahead of the troupe. They approached a group of rock formations, or mounds, and hid in the shadows. Mortimer was giving furious hand signals to some of his lieutenants.

“What's he saying?” Anne whispered to Pilly.

“The secret passage towards Knoll Hilly has been found. We wait until it's safe to go in.” Pixies came flying back, twittering to Mortimer. He turned to the others.

“All is clear at the passageway. They don't know we're here.”

“How do you know?” Asked Anne.

“They are expecting us to attack from the south, not the west. The goblins have been digging through old brownie made tunnels and making deeper tunnels under the land. This one, according to our information, intersects with a tunnel that leads straight to the center of Knoll Hilly, which is where the goblin chief and his henchmen now reside. Our beloved Knoll Hilly.” Said Mortimer. “You all, go down the secret doorway near the south side. Doran, your troupe will stay behind in case you see any hobgoblin patrols about. The rest of us will move in. Let's go!” The troupes moved out. Anne moved with Mortimer as they slipped down a small, shallow tunnel, beneath a hidden trap door under a thick tuft of grass. Inside was cool with only a small troupe of pixies traveling with them to light the way. It sloped downward. Lito stayed by Anne's side for which she was thankful. The brownies, unlike her, seemed not to have problems seeing in the dark. That much at least they had in common with goblins.

They came upon the first of a series of mud and stone walls.

“Henda's Wall.” Said Mortimer.

“What's that?”

“One of the first brownies who came here with Great Old Knoll to make a home. She and her troupe built it ages ago. There is a secret opening along this wall.” They all wound silently along the ancient, rough-hewn stone until they reached a point where a faded, painted sign of a mushroom was carved, right into the middle. Mortimer wiped away a thick layer of dirt and moss, put both his hands on the symbol and suddenly an opening to the other side came into their vision. On the other side they found a room full of sleeping hobgoblins. Startled and groggy they had no chance. The pixies dove in first followed by the brownies. Before the hobgoblins even knew what was happening the brownies and pixies descended on them. Several hobgoblins had their weapons at the ready and lept forward. Anne drew up her hammer, feeling it grow warm in her hand. One of them swung a short, crude stone blade at her, barely missing her shoulder, his movements slow from just awakening from sleep. Anne swung *Star*, hitting him in the face. He cried out as the iron seared burning holes in his skin. His face caved in. A club came down on her back. Dull pain throbbled there as she fell forward, stumbling but she turned around as the hobgoblin was about to leap upon her and club her again. Lito and a group of pixies under his command swarmed on him, tearing off a crooked, pointed ear. The goblin screamed in rage and Anne scrambled to her feet and hit him on the knee, felling him then smashing the side of his head. The brownies, clubs in hand, easily routed this group of hobgoblins. They rounded them up into the tunnel and kicked them out above ground, taking their clubs and stripping them of their clothes. Doran and his troupe chased the hobgoblins off. A small victory! Mortimer sent a pixie named Maisy to relay the message of the retaken post to nearby brownie troupes.

“Gandy, I need reinforcements. Have a troupe come and watch over this new post we've taken back. Go!” Gandy was off.

“They have a weapons cache here.” Said Tollo, who was investigating a covered pit.

“What kind?” Asked Mortimer.

“Clubs and axes.”

“We'll need them. How many?”

“Looks like thirty or forty.”

“Bring them.” They opened another door out to a goblin made tunnel that led downward.

“It looks like they walled up the upper rooms near the mounds. Then built these sewer-like tunnels that lead to who-knows-where.” Said Mortimer in disgust. A few others trailed him into this next tunnel.

“How much damage have they wrought, I wonder?” Asked Tollo.

“No doubt it gets worse as we get farther towards the Grand Toadstool.” Said Mortimer. “Alright. Get to work. There's lots of it!” With more brownies arriving with food and supplies they set to work moving supplies into the newly retaken post and rebuilding it.

“We have retaken one of the most important places in our battle so far. There is a tunnel, according to our maps that leads to the heart of Knoll Hilly from here. Let's find it!” Demanded Mortimer. Gandy had come back with several troupes of brownies behind him. A number of them glowered at seeing Anne. He and his troupe set to work looking for the famed tunnel. Feeling a little awkward around Gandy and his friends she went to Mortimer.

“Mortimer, the hobgoblins stole some precious things from me. I think these things would be of help to all of us if I could get them back.”

“What sort of things?”

“My silver ring. Whenever enemies come close, it glows. Also, the Baobab Prince gave me a horn as a gift. Whenever I'm in trouble he said to blow the horn and help will come to my aid. If I could get them back, they could help everyone.” Mortimer's eyes lit up.

“They would indeed! What mighty gifts! If you actually find them. There is no guarantee you will. Still,” He said in thought, rubbing his hands together. “Take a few troops with you and see if you can get that ring and the horn.” He turned towards the brownies standing closest to him.

“Kell, Marni, help Anne seek these things. They may be of use to us all.”

“Everything helps.” Said Kell. Gandy happened to be listening close by.

“Where are they going?” He demanded.

“To find something for me.”

“We have work to do Mortimer! No one can be spared. . .”

“Why, yes we do. Right now I've sent them on a mission. Never you mind them. Since when did you run affairs around here? We need to decide our next move from here. Get to the maps, Gandy, or continue searching for that tunnel! Like you expressed so plainly, we have work to do and everyone has their part. Including you.” Mortimer's tone brooked no argument. He sharply turned and went back inside the room. Gandy and a few brownies from his troupe scowled and cut Anne dark looks.

Anne was beginning to wonder who her true enemy was in this fight.

.....

Anne, Kell, Marni and five others, Cora, Dilb, Sil, Kai and Tilva traveled cautiously along the dank, deep goblin tunnels, their small torches casting long shadows along the walls. As they traveled farther out it became wet, muddy and the stench grew difficult to bear. They covered their faces with pieces of cloth but this did little to mitigate the smell. Most of the tunnels by the brownies were easy to recognize – they were shallow furrow like hollows with roofs of grass and other vegetation. Often, hundreds of mushrooms grew in and around these tunnels and were even cultivated in the walls of the tunnels. Brownies loved mushrooms for eating and used them to make medicines and potions of all sorts. Brownies and their ways were deeply connected with mushrooms. Brownie tunnels were not very deep nor were they wet or full of foul smells. Goblin tunnels were distinctly different. Some started as a mere hole in the ground that turned into deep snaking tunnels that branched out, filled with separate living quarters, even whole goblin towns. Often they threw trash and other refuse on the ground or dug trash holes near underwater sources. Sometimes they created goblin-made ponds and lakes deep underground. This was why some of them were wet and filled with mud and other unpleasant things. Some goblin tunnels were really nothing more than primitive sewage drains.

They made their way slowly and soon came upon a tunnel lined with lit torches but all was quiet.

“Are you sure all the goblins are gone from here?” Asked Anne, looking around warily.

“That's what the pixies told us. Well, Maisy said most likely, perhaps not all, so be on the watch.” Said Marni.

“We'll have to wall all these up soon so they can't try to retake our post.” Said Kell.

“We've been down these tunnels and saw nothing but dead ends and it stinks down here! I say we go back!” Complained Cora.

“Not to mention one of them ended in what looked like a privy! Filthy animals!” Spat Sil.

“We're sorry Anne. We don't mean to complain but it's hard to look on what our ancestral home has become!” Said Cora.

“I know.” Said Anne. She felt guilty but if she could only find some of the things she lost. Traveling through the goblin tunnels made her feel dirty, as if she needed a good, long bath.

“Amazing, these goblins. Nothing but filth and worse! Good-for-nothing creatures!” Said Kell. “We'll look down one more tunnel then we'll go back.” He said looking at Anne for her approval. She nodded. They all went down this last tunnel, nearly a straight drop. There were two holes, or doorways, dug out on either side at the end. Slowly filing into the right-hand opening they found what looked like the inside of a hovel. It was a little room with a cot and a few ratty blankets piled on top, a chair and an oil lamp and a wooden chest sitting on the ground. It looked empty of life except the usual underground creepy-crawlies. Anne walked over to the chest and peeped in. Inside was her armor and helmet, the helmet still shrunk to the size fit for a doll.

“My armor and helmet! I can't believe it!” She cried. She began furiously overturning all of the contents from the chest. Suddenly they heard an indignant voice.

“What are you doing? Those are mine!” A hobgoblin appeared in the doorway, sputtering at the invaders.

"No they aren't! This here? It was given to me by the Great Grandfather Whitestone himself!" She cried, raising her voice in anger and waving the helmet at him. Kell moved towards the chest to inspect the overturned contents. The hobgoblin's eyes narrowed at her, his gaze suspicious.

"I don't believe you! Why you all are thieves! Thieves!" He cried.

"What would your kind be doing with a thing of beauty like this anyway? Everyone knows that goblins can't make anything good and anything they *do* make they smear with their own refuse!" Shouted Cora.

"It . . . it was given to me by my cousin who got it from a friend who went on an adventure! He risked his life and even lost an arm to get it!"

"An adventure to my house, you mean! After he wrecked it and killed our pet koi fish! And if he was the one who attacked Jordan's dog he deserved to lose an arm!" The hobgoblin's suspicion changed to fear and he began to cry which surprised Anne.

"I swear I didn't do such a thing! I had no idea it was stolen from you." He blubbered. "What are you doing here? This is my home."

"Not anymore! This is brownie territory and always was. You goblins just stole it and destroyed it like you destroy everything you touch. If she says the armor is hers then it's settled as far as I am concerned. You are coming with us. Our leaders will have questions and you'll be giving answers." Demanded Kell. He turned to the others. "Marni, Dillb, Cora and Kai, check the other room across the way and see if there are any more hobgoblins. Sil, you stay with Anne and me." Sure enough, there were two other hobgoblins found hiding in the other room. Anne noticed that one of them wore a green and white piece of cloth, like a handkerchief, tied around his arm. They were marched out and their hands tied behind their backs. Anne tied her helmet to a belt made of thin, tough vines.

"It doesn't fit, you know. That helmet." The first hobgoblin said to her. She glared at him.

"Doesn't surprise me. It wasn't given to you, or your *friend*. It was a gift for me. It fits me just fine when I need to wear it."

"You know what's worse than descending down these goblin tunnels?" Asked Tilva.

"What?" She asked as they started the slow ascent back up.

"That fact that once you get to the bottom everything is uphill."

"Yeah. I hate that too." Said Kell.

"You know, not all of us goblins love filth and trash." Said the first hobgoblin.

"Quiet! You'll speak when we say you can." Snapped Kell.

.....

When they had finally gotten back to the upper chambers they found hundreds of brownies filling up some of the doorways to the goblin-made tunnels and they had made much progress. Many were knee deep in a special paste they had made from crushed pebble, water, dirt and mushroom stems.

"I'm glad you all came back as soon as you did. We were getting a bit worried you might have gotten lost down there!" Said Mortimer. He looked at the prisoners.

"We found them living down below. Brought them up for questioning." Said Kell. Many of the brownies had stopped their work, glaring at the goblins with hatred. Mortimer gazed at them coldly. The hobgoblins looked frightened.

"Throw them in the pit they were storing the weapons in. I will talk with them later." The prisoners were filed out of the tunnel and into the new war room.

"Mortimer, I found my armor!" Said Anne excitedly. He gazed at the lettering and markings that shimmered slightly. He seemed a little disappointed but he smiled anyway.

"It's a thing of beauty!" He said. "Did you find the ring or the horn? I would find those far more useful." Anne's face fell. She shook her head.

"Well, you brought prisoners so at least it wasn't a waste of time. They may have useful information."

"How do you plan to get the information? If they have any?"

"If they are not forthcoming we have clubs."

"But they don't have any weapons!" He gave her an odd look, turned and left. She frowned. She thought they would just talk to the hobgoblins, but clubs. . .

She saw Pilly's rosy, friendly face and went to her.

"Anne! You found your armor! Oh it's so beautiful! Let me have a look at it." They found a place to sit and they talked about the leather armor. Anne put on her vest and her gauntlets and held the helmet in her hands as it grew in size. Pilly exclaimed in excitement at seeing it grow to fit her head. Anne told her how she came by it. Pilly was fascinated with her account of her travels with the wolves and her adventure to the winter fortress on the Ice Sea. To Anne's relief she didn't run

into Gandy or his friends again that day but she was getting the feeling, a chill down her spine, that perhaps her quest for revenge wasn't going to go the way she had intended.

It would be dusk when they would make their next attack. They were busy preparing to cook supper when one more troupe showed up. Jordan was with them.

“How goes it, fellow Most Splendid Royal Adventurer?” He asked, grinning.

“Good so far. We won a battle today.”

“So did we. They say that retaking the central mounds, Knoll Hilly, I think? It won't be as difficult now that they've retaken this part of their homeland.”

“I just hope they're right. We have no idea what the goblins are planning.”

“Once more to the plans!” Called Mortimer. “The last troupe for this battalion has finally arrived. We've got pixies relaying messages back and forth. As it stands, this outpost and one in the south is now back under our control. By now the goblins surely know of it and are preparing a counter-attack. We have walled up all but the most important goblin tunnels, the ones that will lead us to the central mounds of Knoll Hilly. Also, finally, the weapon is ready!” He said with great relish. The air buzzed with excitement.

“When will we use it?” Shouted someone from the gathered crowd.

“I have a trusted select group in place who have it and when I deem the time right, they will plant it in one of the underground goblin holes, one of the most populated goblin dwellings near Knoll Hilly.”

“Near Knoll Hilly?” Asked Tollo. “Is that wise?”

“Of course it is! We will NOT go back now! We will do all that it takes to get back our homes. All that it takes!” Mortimer glared at Tollo, who lowered his head.

“But he's right Mortimer. Won't that destroy Knoll Hilly?” Asked Anne.

“The central mounds are already defiled by the mere presence of the goblins!” Shouted another brownie.

“Yes! And the presence of outsiders does not help the cause!” It was Gandy.

“What do you mean?” Demanded Pilly.

“I mean, outsiders. I mean THEM!” He pointed at Anne and Jordan.

“They have every right to be here, same as us. They've had their homes invaded and destroyed by gob. . . .”

“Don't talk to me of broken windows and broken toys and dead pets! Our homes have been taken away and the land ruined!”

“Perhaps it isn't the same,” said Mortimer in measured tones, “but they are our allies in the fight and their help is invaluable because I say it is.”

“Invaluable?” Questioned one of Gandy's friends scornfully.

“They have weapons and influence among the lordly fairy folk, influence we do not have.” Said Mortimer. Gandy sniffed but this gave the others pause.

“Perhaps they do but we do not need mortals meddling in our affairs. In fact, their meddling, especially hers, has made our fight harder. It wasn't until she decided to involve herself in the Winter Queen's business that the goblins have decided to renew their quest for total control of all brownie haunts and homes!” Anne drew in a sharp breath. Even now that summer was around the corner Queen Faye's hand, long since weakened, could still be felt. It wasn't her fault this was happening to the brownies and it was unfair that Gandy was trying to blame her and Jordan for their problems. She wasn't going to justify herself or her business with the Winter Queen with anyone and if they had a problem with it they could take it up with the gnome Grandfathers. Or Queen Faye herself!

“Many of us are grateful for her help, else none of us would be here to discuss these matters or fight for our land, being that a nice, thick layer of ice and snow would be covering the entire world right now.” Said Pilly.

“I can attest to Jordan's skill with the bow and arrow. A fine weapon it is too.” Said one of the brownie lieutenants.

“We do not care! The mortals should go!” Gandy boldly demanded.

“Yes, go away!” A few others shouted. But some booed this demand. Jordan looked at Anne, confused. Anne sighed.

“That's enough! No one is going anywhere! I say they stay and that's the final brownie word on the matter!” Said Mortimer. Most of the gathered brownies cheered for Anne and Jordan. Mortimer looked pointedly at Gandy.

“If you don't like my decision you can go and sit in the pit with the captured hobgoblins.” Gandy looked aghast.

“You wouldn't dare. . . .”

“I do and I will dare more if you continue wagging your unruly tongue! Bridle it! I will not tell you again and don't you ever challenge me in front of the troupes.” Snapped Mortimer. Gandy fell silent and so did those who stood behind him. But their looks were black and threatening.

.

After a meal of boiled mushrooms, dandelion greens and bitter tea – at this point Anne sorely wished she was feasting at the Whitestone Lodge or Prince Efosa's court – all those gathered listened as Mortimer went over the next plan of attack. Information had been brought back from the pixies that the way towards the main tunnel that led to the heart of the central mounds were clear of goblins, though full of dreadful wastes that they would have to wade through.

“How will we get around down there?” Asked Kell.

“We have the hobgoblins in the pit who gave us information.”

“And how do you know they didn't give us the wrong information?”

“We don't. If they did, they will sorely regret it. I'm sure they know that. They wouldn't be that stupid. They don't seem that aggressive for goblins anyway. They've been cooperative so far from what Tilva tells me. She and a few others I will leave here to guard the outpost. The rest of us, let's head out, get in formation! Get to your troupes!” He took up his club and the others followed. Jordan came up beside Anne as they got ready to leave.

“So you've been practicing with your bow and arrow.”

“Yeah. My name hasn't appeared anywhere on the bow yet.”

“I'm sure it will. It'll take time.”

“What about your stuff that was stolen?”

“I've only found my armor so far.”

“Wish I had it.” Said Jordan. Pilly came up beside them.

“Anne I think we know what happened to your ring. One of the pixies said she spied it on the goblin chief. He wears it on a rope around his neck. A *“round thing that glows bright blue in the darkness”* she said.” Anne screwed up her face in dismay.

“I hope you can get it back.” Said Jordan.

“Thanks Pilly. I have no idea how I can get it from him, yet, but your business is more important right now.”

“Don't give up. Objects like that are precious. We may find a way yet.” The battalion made its way down a tunnel towards the hidden goblin tunnel that would take them to Knoll Hilly. They formed into long columns, winding down like a great, segmented caterpillar. A little green light flew up to Anne's side. It was Lito.

“Hi Lito.” He settled on her shoulder, faint light emanating from him, complementing the faintly shimmering swirls and characters on her armor. Despite the great army of brownies and pixies moving forth for battle, Anne felt more despondent with every step. Lito's little light was the only bright spot in the darkness of the goblin tunnels.

They were all hidden behind a sloppily built wall, inside a spacious, dank cave, having gotten through the mucky tunnels deep underneath the ground. They had to half-way dig their way out as quietly as possible, which is not hard for brownies, to get through to the goblin chambers and tenement dwellings on the other side. They were now in goblin territory, underneath one of the biggest mound sites in the land, close to Knoll Hilly. The hobgoblins were stirring and readying themselves for the night – and more evil mischief! News had only just reached the goblins that two outpost mounds and their tunnels to the south and to the west had fallen silent and they were arranging to see about it. Mortimer, who was looking over the wall and watching the scene, bent down again.

“Alright, Anne and Jordan, you two join Pilly and her troupe. Pilly, you and yours will stay here at the wall. Make sure no goblins get back through that tunnel. I will take all of the rest and trap the goblins going off to investigate the outposts.” He gave a hand signal and all the battalion, five hundred strong, followed him, creeping their way along the backside of the wall, quiet as mice. They disappeared in the darkness, deep into another tunnel. Pilly and her troupe watched the goblins on the other side of the wall in the present chamber. She motioned and her troupe rallied around her.

“We'll make a surprise attack and capture them and bring them back to the pit. Then we will set to work walling these chambers up as well.” She whispered. With that she climbed on to the wall and the others followed and they all gave a rallying cry and charged the goblins. The brownies began the attack in fury. But this group of hobgoblins were better prepared. As they forced the goblins back more came running to join the fight and soon had them surrounded. Jordan was unable to use his bow and arrows, hemmed in by his fighting companions. The battle grew fierce and took longer than they had thought. Anne swung her hammer with such force that *Star* blazed like a blinding bolt of lightening. Soon the brownies rallied around her as the hobgoblins fell back in fear of the iron hammer. They were just about to overtake the hobgoblin force and defeat them when a large, shadowy figure swooped down upon the huge melee and dove it's way inside the chamber. The roof of the chamber cracked and it rained dust, pebbles as thick as smoke. It was a Gryp! A Gryp with jet black scales and feathers tipped with red, a long, snake-like tail and coal red eyes and a long, curved, cruel looking beak. It laughed triumphantly and began tearing into the brownie troupe, scattering many. Most of the brownies fled back through the tunnel with many hobgoblins chasing after them. In his wake rushed in more hobgoblins. The Gryp crashed down and stood in front of Anne, it's eyes ablaze as it gazed at her hammer. With a loud screech it flew against her, knocking her to the ground. She felt the wind leave her and she dropped her hammer. Hobgoblins descended upon them. In the confusion Anne, Jordan, and three brownies, Pilly among them, were captured.

They were tied up and marched down into a cave so deep and dark Anne thought that she might never see the sky again. The air was fetid, foul.

"We have a mind to do away with you right here and now but we got orders. The chief would like to speak with you before you are dealt with." Said one of the hobgoblin guards. He was missing an eye and walked with a severe limp. They were shoved into a small cell with a strong wooden door and stone walls with holes for windows that dotted the walls in one row. They could see out into the cave through these holes but besides bored guards and the shadows cast by the smoking torches that stank of burning dung lining the perimeter of the cave there was nothing to see.

"Aren't you going to at least untie us?" Shouted Jordan. One of the guards moved from his post, unlocked the door to the cell and gave him a nasty blow to the mouth.

"There's your answer, brat!" Snapped the guard.

"What do they want with us?" Whispered Anne. Pilly and the others shrugged.

"Can't be good, whatever it is. I wonder whether the others succeeded." Whispered Pilly.

"Let's hope." Said a brownie named Kestar. They all huddled together, listening and watching the guards who turned back to their game of bones and jacks.

"I'm quite sure the hobgoblins that went chasing after the rest of my troupe will have a big surprise waiting for them." Said whispered Pilly. "Look at this place. Brownies would never dig so deep. And smell the air. How can any creature live in such air?" She lowered her voice even more. "Goblins are a filthy bunch. Good-for-nothing creatures."

"Smells like an outhouse." Mumbled Jordan. Anne looked at his mouth worriedly. Even in the firelight she could see a bruise forming on his lower lip. Suddenly they heard many heavy, scratching footsteps approach and a pair of bright red eyes peering in at them.

"Well, well, well. The famous Anne Greene and her little friend, too. Oh, what was the name? Jordan." It was the black Gryp that had foiled their attack.

"I don't believe we met under ideal circumstances the first time. My name is Danzir. Now that we are acquainted, I can get a look at you. Hmm. Rather puny, both of you, but you'll do fine as snacks, later." Jordan gulped and began sweating. Anne's mind began to race. She had encountered bad Gryps before and even fought them. She tried to stifle her fear.

"The goblin chief wants a word with us so you can't eat us." She said. Danzir chuckled.

"Well, I *did* say later." Danzir stalked back and forth in front of the cell door peering at them through the holes in the wall. His eyes gleamed with sinister light, his snakelike tail whipping back and forth like that of an angry cat.

"I see that you have nowhere to go. So sad. I usually prefer to chase down my prey. More fun that way." He gloated. Anne watched him intently.

"You're supposed to give us a riddle to answer and if we get it right you can't hurt us."

"Is that so? The problem with that, you see, is that you are not out in the open, so there isn't much use in telling riddles now is there?"

"In other words, you don't play fair."

"What is fairness?" Anne knew he simply didn't care so she changed the subject.

"I see you didn't get captured by the Winter Queen." She shot back. Some of the hobgoblins looked up from their gaming.

"Bah! There was nothing in it for me with the Winter Queen but slavery and drudgery. You did not think me such a fool, did you?"

"Well, I've seen a lot of foolish Gryps. They are trapped in the north now."

"And I am not simply any Gryp. You will smart for your impertinence soon enough, girl." Danzir was smaller than most Gryps she'd seen, now that she got a better look at him. She had fought Gryps bigger than him but she wondered if it mattered. Still, she found herself growing more courageous in the exchange.

"So hanging with goblins is better?"

"Much. We do what we will and go where we will. Making mischief for its own sake is the only law I follow. One that the goblins and I agree on whole-heartedly. I enjoy it immensely. Come closer." He whispered, poking his beak through a hole. She, Jordan and the brownies remained rooted where they were, at the back wall.

"Very well then." He said, turned and stuck his tail through the hole and lashed it out like a bullwhip, hitting her arm. The protective characters covering it lit up. The strike had no effect but he struck her again this time hitting her chin. She yelped in pain and the hobgoblins laughed. Anne grew angry. If only she had her hammer. . .

"Just having a bit of fun? Make sure you leave 'em intact for the chief, Danzir." Said one of the guards and they went back to their gaming.

"Oh, I can't really give you a proper thrashing for your impertinent tongue from here but if the goblins don't repay you and these brownies for all of the havoc you have wreaked I shall be waiting." He said and left.

"Gryps throwing in with goblins? What's the world coming to?" Asked Kestar. He shook his head. Anne had thought that

all bad Gryps had went into service to the Winter Queen. This interchange was proof that this assumption was wrong. She could feel the sting of the small gash on her chin. It was welling up with blood. She watched a drop fall onto her armor.

"Maybe you shouldn't argue with a Gryp, Anne." Whispered Pilly.

"I shouldn't. But I've fought Gryps bigger than him."

"But you don't have your hammer." Whispered Jordan.

"True, but I found my armor, so, I can find my hammer again. Besides, he's a coward. No real Gryp would be skulking around here underground with hobgoblins."

"Even cowards can be dangerous." Said Pilly. Anne had to agree but she held fast to her own thoughts. There was usually a way through or up out of these things. And she still had her moonstones. If only she could get to the Mirrored Lake! There was also Antigone! She had not called on her friend in a long while. Right then, footsteps could be heard coming towards the cell. Another patrol of hobgoblins. The guards scrambled to clear away their gaming pieces and ran around bumping into each other trying to stand to attention. The guard of this newest approaching group kicked their gaming boards and pieces out of his way, ignoring their stumbling and marched forward. He wore a tattered coat of mail. He came and stood right in front of the door with his big belly hanging out under his ill fitting mail, his legs squat and thick like logs and his arms folded. He squinted at them through black, piggish eyes.

"You're wanted. The chief will see you both. Now." He said to Anne and Jordan. Coming up behind him was another goblin that stood a head taller than all of the others in the cave. It was Morvul, the chief himself and hopping about him like a satellite was Stinkthief! The chief wore a broad collar of rope saddled with many bones and fangs over his armor. The ring, *her* ring, hung in the middle of the collar. He had long, pointed ears, both which looked as if they had been torn in fights long ago. He had great black eyes full of malice and he too sported a huge belly from much over eating and drinking and he had clawed feet covered in matted, filthy hair, oozing pustules and warts. He was gnawing on a fat bone, grease dripping from his face. His mail, while new looking and of good make was filthy and his teeth were the color of rancid butter.

"Well. The great Anne Greene! Not so great here, though. And you, boy. I've never seen or heard of you till now. I'll never understand mortals, intervening in our affairs. Really." He sniffed. "Normally I am too busy to attend to such matters like speaking with prisoners but I have a bargain for you both." His voice was thick with grease. He paused to tear some meat of the bone. He chomped noisily as the other hobgoblins sniggered. Stinkthief smiled maliciously but said nothing.

"Ahem. Yes." The chief belched loudly and wiped his hands on Stinkthief. Anne thought that she had never set eyes on a more disgusting sight than Stinkthief but she was wrong.

"Yes. My bargain is this. Both of you will stay out of our war with the folk of dawn. It does not concern you. Go home and leave us alone to fight our war with the brownies and things will go well with you and your families. You will not be bothered, your homes and families will stay safe and not be touched by goblin hand. What say you both? Do you agree?" He asked slyly. Jordan looked hopeful. Anne knew better than to truly agree to anything. After all, he was careful to say that they would not be touched by *goblin* hand. It sounded like Queen Faye's trickery. However, she didn't want her family, or Jordan's to get hurt and could not see a way out of this. She felt defeated. It was a sly and also a very real threat.

"What do you think, Anne?" Jordan looked desperate and he was not as experienced as she was in these matters.

"Let me speak." She whispered. She turned to the chief.

"If you promise not to try and trick us then yes, we agree." She said, with her fingers crossed behind her back. Kestar who saw this, smiled mischievously. The chief stared at her for a long time, seemingly trying to examine her answer. Stinkthief frowned and whispered something in the chief's ear. They both laughed at some little secret.

"Good. Ay, guard, let them out. Safely now. We gave our word, after all." He smiled, showing rows of rotten teeth. One of the guards came forward and unlocked the door.

"We'll miss you!" cried Pilly.

"I will miss you all too." Said Anne. She and Jordan both stepped out of the cell. The goblin troupe escorted them through the cave and they encountered a doorway with two tunnels, one leading up and one leading down. Instead of escorting them upwards, they were pushed towards the tunnel leading even deeper underground.

"Hey! I thought. . ." Cried Jordan.

"Never mind what you thought!" Said Stinkthief who started giggling. "Did you really think we would let you escape? We have deliciously horrible things waiting for you down below! And you won't need that armor, Anne. How did you find it anyway? I'll have to take it for myself this time!" He then reached for her helmet and tried to snatch it away. She flinched away from his grasp. *So it was you!* She thought but she had no time to fume. Anne pretended to stumble and she fell back into the goblin party and Jordan, watching her, started to do the same but before the goblins could react there was an ear splitting boom and a crack that shook the tunnels and the ground for leagues around. Great holes opened up in the earth and the goblins fell down through them. Jordan and Anne just missed falling in, saved by lying down. When the tremors finally stopped they made a mad dash for the upper tunnel. As they climbed through the debris they could finally see daylight.

"What just happened?" Asked Jordan, panting.

"I think that was Mortimer's secret weapon."

"So what do we do now?" He said, wriggling his tied hands, trying to get something from his back pocket.

"I'm not sure I can find my way out on my own. We need a Way Wanderer." Suddenly like a light that was snapped on in the dark she knew what to do. Jordan managed to get his pocket knife and was sawing his bindings off.

"Hey, get mine off too." After cutting through his he cut hers off. She straightened up, cupped her hands to her mouth and called the name, three times, as loudly as she could.

"Who are you calling?"

"A friend."

"Who's her?"

"Antigone."

"We have to wait for her? I'm not waiting around here."

"Well, I am." Jordan looked at her expectantly she merely stared back. Then he finally sat down beside her and waited.

"Don't worry. She'll get us out of here."

"I wish I had my bow and arrow. Just a few days ago we caught the goblins raiding a mushroom ring where some brownies lived. They chased them out. I shot one of the goblins right in the backside. You should have heard him squeal!"

"Too bad it wasn't Stinkthief!" She said.

"I'll get him. I know he was behind that stuff that happened back home. He won't escape."

"Yeah." But she felt depressed. Her plan failed and now she was going back home. This was the first time she had ever gone to Other Land without having accomplished a thing she set out to do. Soon they heard the flapping of great wings. Antigone, as sure as the sun, was flying towards them. She nearly blotted out the sun as she descended down. Jordan jumped up in fright, ready to run.

"You never told me Antigone was one of those gryphon creatures!"

"She's a good Gryp. As long as you aren't evil she won't harm you. And also because you're with me." The Gryp settled down in front of them, folding in her great wings. Her violet, blue and green colors made her look as if she had flown through a rainbow.

"Great sun, moon and stars above!"

"It's been a long time, Antigone!"

"And so it has. How goes it with you?"

"Mostly fine. Except goblins."

"Goblins? What of them?" Antigone's green eyes flashed.

"They caused a lot of mischief at home, wrecking my house and my friend's house too. They even hurt his pet dog! They killed my koi fish and stole the things I was given in Other Land. Especially my ring." Antigone glanced at Jordan and nodded to him curtly.

"Well!" She said stoutly. "I'd heard that they've been up to something wicked lately but moving about in the world beyond again? What happened that you two caught their attention?"

"We recovered some stolen things from the fortress in the Dark Mountain. The Fairy King hired Stinkthief to steal them. They were a part of a plan he had. We stopped the Fairy King from his plan to hunt forever. Stinkthief, we think, decided to get revenge by attacking us. We came here to set things right but things haven't really worked out."

"Stinkthief! I've heard the name before. A stink in the nose and nothing good is ever connected with him. His brother was even worse!"

"His brother died in the fortress."

"As he probably deserved, if all of the tales told about his misdeeds were true. One reaps what they sow. And your ring! The one set with the golden jewel from the Summer Queen's own diadem! Stolen! As for the Fairy King, now that I think on it, he may very well be behind this evil business of the goblin folk."

"You think so?"

"I do. Like with all of King Alberich's schemes, they point to one goal: the Wild Hunt."

"How. . .how would that help his plan?" Asked Jordan timidly.

"I am not quite sure. My guess is that it is creating a distraction. Chaos is the card he plays to the front while he plots secretly."

"We saw the goblin chief wearing Anne's ring around his neck." Said Jordan.

"Did you, now?" Asked Antigone in dismay. Anne nodded, her eyes filled with tears thinking about it. Grandmother Barbara had given her that ring.

"It's ok." Jordan said trying to comfort her, forgetting his fear of the Gryp.

"And how did you come to find all this out? Goblin chief? What the devil? Come, tell me everything!" Anne told her of the war between the brownies and the goblins and how they came back to settle a score with the hobgoblins who attacked their homes and got mixed up in the war instead.

"All is not well yet, young ones. This cannot be endured! What do you need me to do Anne?"

"Well, we were trying to get home."

"Home? How do you mean?"

"The goblins captured us and let us go on the condition that if we leave Other Land and stopped getting involved in the

war that they would leave us alone. They said that if we did not go they would hurt our families.”

“Is that so? And what makes you think they have any intention of keeping their word?”

“Anne, I got the feeling after they let us go that they weren't going to keep their word at all. Remember where they were going to take us?” Reminded Jordan. Anne wiped her face.

“I hope you didn't strike any bargain with them?” Said Antigone.

“I didn't. I kept my fingers crossed the whole time.”

“Good! So, what *should* we do?” Said Antigone, pointedly. They both shrugged. Antigone was not impressed. “Let me see if I have the right of it. These goblins have not only invaded brownie territory - long ago as it was – but they have invaded and ruined your homes and hurt those you care about and you acquiesce to their demands? What will you do when they come back for a bit more trouble? I am shocked and appalled, not by the goblins but by you, Anne. One should never run from scoundrels. It only emboldens them. Of course, if you want to go home that is your choice and I will take you there but it signals to them that they have the power to dominate you at will and they *will* be back. Mark my words.”

“What do you think we should do?”

“Well, you called me, did you not? I shall help where ever I can. I shall enter the fray in your defense and for you friend here as well!”

“I don't want anyone to get hurt. . .” began Anne but Antigone made a derisive noise.

“Nonsense! That's what friends are for. A friend is born, closer than a brother, in times of distress. Where is your hammer?”

“I lost it in the goblin tunnels.” Antigone tut-tutted at this. “At least you still have your armor. And you, man-child. You are alone with no weapon about you as well?”

“I have a bow and arrow but I left it in the tunnels too.” Antigone shook her head in disapproval.

“Well, what a pair. What is your decision Anne?”

“I want my hammer!” She wiped her face again and steeled herself. Nothing was worse than disappointing such a brave and stout friend as Antigone. The destruction at her house rose up in her mind and broke in her memory like a freshly torn wound.

“I want my bow and arrow!” Said Jordan.

“It is settled then. We will make a search for your weapons and you will go back into the fray, but not unarmed. And this time with a Gryp.”

“Um, Antigone. I should warn you, they have a Gryp working with them. A bad one.” Warned Anne.

“Yeah. His name is Danzir.”

“Danzir! I know him of old. He's thrown in with goblins has he? Shiftless as ever. I'm sure there's some purely selfish motive for his involvement. I do not fear him, though he'll give a fight! It means I'll have a challenge and I never run from a challenge. Neither should either of you. Let us away! Time is against us!”

Antigone flew high above, in silence. By the time they found Jordan's weapon, strewn about in the rocks of a bomb blast, it was nearly night and when they went looking for *Star* they came upon a band of hobgoblins trying to mend a blown apart passage way. They could see them by the full, luminous light of the sister moons and of the dying rays of the evening sun.

"I see hobgoblins but no brownies." Said Anne.

"Goblins are creatures of dusk and night, that is why, no doubt. I can see your hammer though, thrown upon a patch of dirt hill, there." Said Antigone.

"I wonder how it got there?"

"Do not worry yourself over it. Be glad of your fortune. First, we must deal with these goblins. Jordan, I shall sit you down in a tree here. If things go badly try to pick off some of them with your arrows if you can."

"I'll do my best." Jordan said and saluted.

"Good. Anne, let us deal with this matter." They descended quietly and when they got near to the hobgoblins, Antigone let out a blood-curdling screech, startling and frightening the hobgoblins. When she reached the ground, they scattered and tried to hide themselves. Anne crept along the blown apart tunnel which looked more like a shallow ravine. She picked up *Star*. Several hobgoblins were hiding behind the dirt pile. She adjusted her helmet, walked around the pile and confronted them.

"Why are you hiding?" She demanded. Antigone glowered at them through bright green eyes, still and threatening as a giant gargyle. One of them came forward gingerly, shuddering at the Gryp's presence.

"We don't want to fight. We're just trying to repair our home."

"This place belongs to the brownies!"

"It used to, long ago and still does but we have lived here for as long as any of us can remember." He said glancing at his companions. They nodded eagerly looking from her to the Gryp.

"It's our home too. Where else can we go?" The others crept out of their hiding place and stood next him, keeping watchful eyes on Antigone. It struck Anne as odd that these hobgoblins did not seem menacing or ready to fight. Nor did she feel threatened or afraid. *Why?* She lifted her hammer and they all jumped back. She rested it on her shoulder, giving the hobgoblins a quizzical look. The first one spoke up again.

"My name is Gnatty. We are peaceful. We don't want to hurt anyone and we were never in support of this war."

"I don't understand."

"Most of our folk support the fighting but in the course of all the fighting they've been destroying the land all around. Some of us hobgoblins are against this war because of all the damage and destruction it's causing. We just want to live in peace with the brownies."

"Hmm." Murmured Antigone.

"Most of the brownies probably wouldn't agree to that. Some of them don't like non-brownies."

"I know. We aren't sure what to do about that. If only we could all sit down and talk. We know that our forebears took these lands away from the brownies long ago but now that we have been here for generations it would make sense to talk about how to live together in peace." Anne thought about it. She couldn't really argue with Gnatty. She saw nothing wrong with what he was saying but she didn't think the brownies would agree to any such thing.

"Well, if you won't try to hurt or attack me, I won't attack you. I can't promise you they will listen but I can try to give them a message. I don't know. They might listen. There's always a chance." She said, thinking of Pilly.

"I'm sure our hobgoblin brethren and their behavior have much to do with how the brownies view all goblins. So far, our efforts to communicate a peaceful agreement with the brownies have fallen on deaf ears and we are considered traitors by other goblins. They hate us and often put us to forced, hard labor when they find out that we do not support the war against the brownies. Perhaps you could send them this message: We hobgoblins who want peace, we call ourselves the Peace Brigade."

"The Peace Brigade? I will give the message to them! Is there anything else, Gnatty?"

"Here is a sign from me. The brownie leaders might recognize it." He pulled out a green and white rag from his pocket in his britches with a green hobgoblin silhouette painted on it. He handed it to her.

"Hey! I've seen something like this before!"

"You have? Perhaps you met one of our friends? This is our sign. It is illegal to have it. They call it the sign of the cowardly-hobs. But we don't see much sense in all this. Both goblin and brownie homes are being destroyed along with the land in the escalating violence." Anne sighed. Things just got a little more complicated and took a turn for. . . well, she wasn't sure.

"I will do my best to tell them, Gnatty. My name is Anne." She folded the cloth and put it away under her armor.

"Another thing. Our folk have a secret weapon, like the brownies do. A red dust-like poison. Something they got from the Fairy King's alchemists. It's called Fire Dust. They've been using it for the last few days and plan to use it again tonight. It destroys all vegetation. Even the soil."

“And how much of this dust do they possess?” Asked Antigone.

“Three barrels of it but it only takes a handful in the hand of each goblin to do damage to countless acres of land.”

“How can we find them?” Asked Anne.

“You can't miss them. The dust is fiery-colored and it can be seen at night. If you look closely you can see a red halo or what looks like a reddish glow over the ground. In the morning, everything it has touched will be dead.”

“So *that's* the secret weapon the goblins are using. I've heard the brownies mention it before.” She said, her worry increasing. “Thank you Gnatty. I hope we meet again.” Just then, they heard Jordan screaming in a panic. He was surrounded by night pixies.

“We have to hurry!” Said Anne.

“Beware! Some night pixies have joined in with the goblins for fun and spite. There is also a Gryp with them. Danzir is his name.”

“Oh, we know all about Danzir!” Anne said. She ran and jumped on Antigone's back.

.....

Jordan found himself surrounded by the tiny, fierce, winged creatures. Not the kind he had gotten used to while traveling with the brownies, though at first glance they looked exactly the same. These were silver or had skin of paler colors of their day cousins. Some were jet black with silver eyes. Up to constant mischief along with their duties of the evening and the night, they were trying to push him out of the tree and when that had not worked they began nipping at him with their teeth.

“Help! Help me! Stop!” He cried as they twittered and laughed. Antigone came snapping at them so furiously that they moved away in a swarm cloud, twittering and cursing in their tiny, venal voices at the Gryp.

“I thought pixies were friendly!” He said, climbing on behind Anne.

“Some are and some are not. Night pixies are not wholly evil but they can't really be trusted. When other night creatures are up to bad business they gravitate towards such trouble like moths to flame.” Said Antigone.

“I don't want to be a flame for them.”

“If you think they're bad you should see winter pixies.” Said Anne. Antigone chuckled.

“Say, rather, that you would *not* want to see them. So, our next business is a place to regroup and find your friends, I would think?” Asked Antigone.

“It's dark and I think they're underground now. We should wait until morning to find them.” Said Anne.

“Then they will be up and to the battle again. Very well, we will find a place to sleep. Any ideas?”

“Let's go to the Mirrored Lake.”

.....

As they flew through the tree tops, far below they saw low, red clouds covering the ground in large patches like a large, patched blanket of fog and dust. It bloomed out like slowly, unfolding red blossoms along the ground then the blossoming clouds would disappear. The goblins were hard at work underneath the moons and who knew what things would look like by the morning?

“It is your decision Anne. What should we do?” Antigone said as they flew on. Anne felt torn. She was afraid of what things would look like the next day but there was not much they could do. She had no idea if the red dust would harm them if they got near to it. And there were too many goblins about now. They would surely be overwhelmed.

“Let's continue to the Mirrored Lake, Antigone. Hopefully they haven't gotten that far.”

“I wonder how much damage will be done by tomorrow.” Said Jordan.

“So do I, but we will work to fix it when we can and not before.” Said Antigone. Anne felt heartened by Antigone's words. She was always steadfast in her belief even in the face of doom and danger.

They finally came to the lake, which thankfully, was once again pristine and beautiful, especially under the full eyes of the Lady Moons. Anne and Jordan slid from Antigone's back. She settled by one of the huge mushrooms just past the shore and folded in her wings, watching over them with bird bright eyes. Anne walked to the edge of the shore. The lake seemed abandoned again. But the moons watched. The mushrooms in the ring around the lake had begun to grow again, their spots glowing softly which created a ring of light around the lake. As she peered into the water, its surface was as smooth as the mirrors of Lady Pearl's palace and she could see the faces of the moons above, shining in a bejeweled sky. Many thoughts rushed in on her. Her visit to the Lady Moons, the Malediction, Lady Grey's true aspect, smoke and vapors, the caves, the glittering treasures of silver and moonstone, the magical night carnival of Lady Pearl, and the Blessing. It seemed these thoughts spooled out into an eternity of dream.

And then she remembered the taking of the moonstones. She felt deep in a pocket under her armor and pulled the

moonstones out. She took them both out and threw them into the lake. They made a soft plosing sound and wide ripples expanded from where they fell, traveling across the surface. Whether anything like a wish would come of it she didn't know but she had a debt to settle and it was now settled.

“Thank you, Lady Grey. There are your moonstones.” She whispered. Jordan sat down near her in silence. They both slept on the shore of the lake, slipping from deep thought about the many things ahead of them and into dreams with a purpose.

All the while with Antigone sleeping lightly and waking periodically to watch over them.

When she awoke the next morning it was to a clear and gentle dawn. A few stars twinkled low on the horizon and the moons seemed unusually large and bright, one milky silver, the other silver-gray. Resting on her shoulder was Lito. He was just waking himself and sat up and gazed at her. She was delighted. Had her unspoken prayers been answered? She wasn't sure but it was a new day and new days were always filled with promise. Jordan lay, snoring softly behind her. She shook him awake and looked for Antigone, who had remained in the same spot. Anne gazed at the lake once more. It was so radically different from what she had encountered last year or even a few months ago. It was as it should always be.

"Ready to be on your way then?" Asked Antigone with her eyes closed, hearing her footsteps.

"I'm ready." Said Anne. Antigone yawned and then lowered herself. "Did you eat, Antigone?"

"Not yet. It seems we have a visitor." She said looking at the pixie on Anne's shoulder.

"It's Lito. He can help us find where the brownies near Knoll Hilly are located." Lito hid partially within Anne's curly hair, eying Antigone with suspicion.

"She's my friend Lito. Don't worry about her." Lito then fluttered from his spot, cautiously floating along Antigone's side. Jordan tied his weapon on to his vine belt and followed.

"Some breakfast would be nice." He said, looking around.

"We will eat when the time comes. Besides, an empty stomach sharpens the mind!" Said Antigone. Anne and Jordan climbed atop her back and she turned to the day pixie.

"Lito, show us the way." Lito hovered in the air a few seconds then took off south. Antigone spread her wings and she was off behind him. They were flying among the great, tall trees of the southern wood and after long since passing the lake they eventually came upon the goblin mischief done in the night. Everywhere the Fire Dust touched the land it was charred black, fire-blasted. It looked like a terrible web of gaping rashes along the forest floor, with lush forest and terrain mixed with large patches of destroyed land. Only the trees seemed untouched, at least from their eye-view. Wherever the brownies lived or made homes near their mounds and haunts there the red dust had been. It reminded Anne of the blight last fall. It saddened her that the land and plants were savaged without so much as a care. And it angered her.

"Awful!" Said Jordan.

"Aye, it is. Which is why it would be a defeat for you both to acquiesce to the goblins' demands to go home. They will surely follow you there anyway."

"You know what? I just thought of something Antigone. They wouldn't have even cared about us unless they thought we were a real threat to them."

"Indeed, Anne and you are certainly a threat to all evil-doers in Other Land. Now that you have brought a stout friend with you, double the trouble! They don't much like that!" Said Antigone.

"Look to your courage and your friends. Who knows when your hour of triumph may arrive? It certainly won't come if you run away!"

"Then we will fight!" Said Anne. Antigone gave a hearty laugh and so did Jordan. After some time Lito began twittering to Antigone and pointing and he flew down towards a long series of mounds connected by brownie tunnels in a clearing. The Gryp descended slowly. There was a low rumble rising from the ground and then a terrible blast shook the ground, sending shock-waves through the air. Jordan nearly fell from Antigone's back. He scrambled and grasped onto Anne's armor for support.

"Bombs!" Shouted Anne. They could see in the distance a grayish brown mushroom cloud rising up.

"Are bombs any better than Fire Dust?" Asked Anne.

"Good question. I prefer face to face combat to all this sneaking around and throwing weapons from afar." Said Antigone.

"But maybe the bombs will help them win?" Asked Jordan.

"Maybe but what will be left?" Asked Anne. "Look at the damage that they cause. Still, I don't know what else they can do against this red dust. It just seems so crazy. There won't be a home for either brownies or goblins if this keeps up." They reached the ground near one of the thatched-roof tunnels. Lito disappeared inside a small opening in the ground near the tunnel. Soon enough, Pilly and Kestar came scrambling out of a doorway of one of the mounds. Anne was happy to see them both. They stopped in shock and fear at Antigone's presence. Pilly was the first to overcome her fright when she saw Anne was not afraid.

"Pilly!"

"Anne!" Anne ran to hug her.

"Don't worry, she's my friend. How did you escape?"

"Mortimer blew up the tunnels near the prison cells! We took many hobgoblins prisoner. We are close to winning! Half of the goblins have been pushed out of the homelands. The ones still left are in the capital, at the Grand Toadstool and they are surrounded on all sides now! Only a few more days and we will retake our homeland!"

"That's great!" Said Jordan.

"Except the goblins who have been pushed out have been very busy using red dust." Said Anne. Pilly's face fell.

"I know."

"What do you plan to do about it?" Asked Antigone.

"I don't know yet. Mortimer ignores the red dust problem. He says our focus is getting the land back. He hasn't said what to do about the red dust yet." Said Pilly.

"Well I hope he creates a plan at some point for none of your folk will have a home the way these goblins are carrying on!"

"Why do you care?" Asked Kestar.

"I'm with Anne as her friend and champion and by extension, Jordan. They have entered this fray to help the cause of your folk and lent you their arms. I will lend you my skill as a warrior, if you will have me."

"We would have them!" Said Pilly. "What is your name, if I may ask?"

"Antigone of the Mountains of the Sky. I hear they have another Gryp working with them. One my brother and I know of old times."

"Oh, yes. A scary and fierce creature. We don't want to meet him again." Said Kestar.

"Then you will need my help."

"Come then, Antigone. We are getting ready to plan our next move. Hopefully, it will be our last battle. We'll find a cool place for you to rest underground for now." Even as Pilly said this, another bomb went off far away. They looked at the sickening grayish clouds. Anne was not sure how she would bring up the Peace Brigade's cause to the brownies.

"How can you plan the last battle when this one is unfinished?" Asked Antigone.

"Mortimer is always a step ahead."

Underground once again, they entered a vast cave-like room, with a wide, long table made of slabs of stone sitting on fat, wide rocks. It was brimming over with maps. The tunnels leading in and out of this room were teeming with busy brownies. Many had made the move back to their original mounds and excitement hung in the air. Some were singing songs of home. Antigone waited inside a large cave and Kestar gave her a wide, deep bowl of cold water. Her presence startled most when they first saw her but on finding out she was on their side by way of Anne many brownies were excited at the prospect of having a powerful warrior on their side. Anne and Jordan were ushered into the newly made war room.

"What happened to you? We were so horrified about what might have happened!" Marni. There was Dilb, Kai, Tilva, Tollo and Cora all happy to see them.

"The goblin chief said he'd let us go if we agreed to go home but they had no intention of letting us go. They were trying to force us further down into the goblin tunnels when a bomb suddenly went off." Said Jordan.

"The bomb separated us from the goblins and we escaped." Said Anne.

"It broke apart the prison doors and we all escaped too. However, the tunnels there are in near ruins!"

"When we came back the hobgoblins that followed the troupe back to our retaken post met with a surprise. They were surrounded by brownies, soundly whipped and stripped and run off!"

"Attention! Everyone, please! Around the table!" Mortimer had entered the room with Doran at his side. All of the brownies present crowded around the table or sat on the floor. Mortimer's face brightened when he caught glimpse of Anne and Jordan.

"We have now entered Knoll Hilly!" A rowdy cheer went up. "We have one troupe still out there and we have just gotten word from them that the thick western walls and mounds around the Grand Toadstool in the center of Knoll Hilly have finally been blasted through. Victory is near!" Another cheer.

"But what about the poisoned dust? The goblins have been spreading it everywhere!" Said Pilly. Doran frowned at her.

"Yes, and that is regrettable, Pilly, but we've had this discussion before. We must deal with that after the homeland is retaken. Victory first!" A murmur of approval rose from the crowd.

"The entire land may be destroyed by that time." Whispered Anne to Jordan. She suddenly remembered the green and white cloth. As Mortimer went on with the plans she pulled it out surreptitiously and thought about how to bring up the subject – alone either to Mortimer or Pilly. She caught Gandy and his friends staring at her and she quickly put it back in her pocket but it was too late. Gandy seized upon the opportunity. He and his friends made their way, pushing and shoving through the crowd to get close to Mortimer.

"You, there! What's that you have? I told you, Mortimer, that mortals could not be trusted!"

"What now, Gandy?" Asked Mortimer, exasperated.

"There, in the girl's pocket, she has something. Something dangerous to our cause!" Gandy was now standing not an inch away from her. Jordan's face turned dark red and he stepped up beside Anne. Gandy ignored him.

"What?" She said defiantly.

"That cloth you have. A goblin lie."

"What do you mean?" Mortimer demanded, irritated at being interrupted. One of Gandy's friends snatched it from her pocket and held it aloft for all to see.

"Hey!" She shouted.

"This thing is from the so-called Peace Brigade! A well known ploy by the goblins to have a group of spies infiltrate the land and stay here to serve their interests, to undermine us when we retake the homeland. It is an especially dangerous ploy now that we have nearly retaken the whole of Knoll Hilly and its surrounding brownie haunts!"

"There's no such thing as peaceful goblins!" Shouted a voice.

"That's right! Now why would she possess such a thing unless she's a spy? Or a sympathizer?"

"I am NOT a spy! I've been fighting the goblins, the same as you all!"

"Please explain how this cloth came into your possession?" Demanded Doran.

"The goblin chief tried to make a bargain with Jordan and me. He said that if we leave Other Land that he would leave us and our families alone."

"Which was a bargain you should have accepted." Gandy said venomously.

"Except, I don't *make* bargains with bad people, and, he lied. He wasn't going to keep his end of the bargain at all. When they let us out, a bomb went off which got us separated from the goblins and we escaped. We came upon another group of goblins and they called themselves the Peace Brigade and they wanted me to give you a message. That they really do want to live in peace with brownies and they don't want to fight."

"No peace with them!" Shouted some voices and the crowd was becoming restive. Mortimer looked at her and Jordan with suspicion. Anne was becoming frustrated and angry.

"Why should we believe you?" Demanded one of Gandy's friends. Gandy grinned, as it seemed the crowd was about to turn on her and Jordan. Jordan spoke up.

"We have someone who can back us up. A Gryp named Antigone. She's here with us. Pilly can tell you. Antigone witnessed the whole thing with the Peace Brigade! So, if you plan to call us liars, stop right there. Maybe you don't want peace with them but if Anne says that she was asked to relay a message then that's what she did. We're not trying to trick any of you!"

"Hmm." Said Mortimer. "The Gryp can back you up, you say?"

"As sure as the sun." Said Anne, fighting back rising anger. She felt her face getting hot.

"You're wrong about them, Gandy and all you are doing is causing more problems!" Said Pilly.

"Quiet Pilly!" Said Gandy imperiously.

"Why?"

"Quiet I say! Or maybe you're a traitor to the cause?"

"Traitor! *Why you.* . . ." Pilly lunged at Gandy and it took Doran, Jordan and a host of others to hold her back. Her face was red as Fire Dust.

"You go too far, Gandy. You know full well Pilly is loyal to all our folk!" Warned Kestar.

"I know *no* such thing!"

"Give me that!" Demanded Mortimer as he grabbed the cloth. He turned it around in his hand, frowning. Then looked at Anne and Jordan again.

"Perhaps they have tried to draw you into their intrigues. We do not make deals with goblins, peaceful or no." He said finally.

"I am sorry if it caused a problem Mortimer. He merely wanted to give you a message and had no other way. That not all of the goblins support the war. I have nothing to do with his cause, I'm only a messenger." Said Anne.

"She does not know all of the history between brownies and the goblins and neither does Jordan. I will not lay blame on them for the goblin treachery, and this cloth represents the most dangerous sort of treachery." Said Mortimer. But Anne was sure that Gnatty and his folk meant no treachery or villainy. She was also sure at this point that mistreatment and long battles with the goblins had made the brownies unreasonable and unwilling to consider anything other than complete victory.

"Anne, we cannot and will not deal with them." Said Doran. However Gandy was not finished.

"There is another thing she withheld from us. Moonstones. The very gift that has won us this war with the goblins. She has them! Where are they?" He turned to her, smirking.

"You have moonstones? Why didn't you tell us?" Some of them demanded. She looked around at the crowd and the faces there. She knew she had a good reason for giving them to the lake even if it did not sit well with the brownies and should anything happen, she would not hesitate to call on Antigone.

"Well? Did you have the moonstones? Where are they?" Mortimer demanded. Anne was glad she did not have them. No more bombs needed to be made and she wasn't about to lie to them.

"Yes, I had them. Two of them. When Jordan and I escaped with Antigone we went to the Mirrored Lake to see if any damage had been done to it by the goblins. It was safe so we stayed there for the night. I tossed them in the lake."

"Why would you do a thing like that? Don't you see the problem we are all facing here? We could have used those moonstones!" Said Doran.

"Can't you all see she's a spy?" Accused Gandy.

"Because I owed someone a debt. You remember, Mortimer when Zi and I went there to see the Lady Moons and brought back moonstones. You even asked us to bring back one for you. We took several, stole them, actually. I put them in the lake as payment for what I took from Lady Grey." Mortimer's frown softened and he looked thoughtful. The crowd hushed at the mention of Lady Grey.

"I approve of this. Pilly and I and our families were caretakers of the ring around the Mirrored Lake before this war. That was a wise thing you did Anne, making amends with our ever mercurial Grey Lady. A good thing indeed. I wonder how she will feel of our abandonment of the lake?" He looked around the room and the brownies were quiet. "And now, Gandy, I'll hear no more about spies and traitors in our midst! We have a battle to win and gossip and rumor-mongering won't win it!"

"Do you mean. . ." Gandy began but Mortimer grew enraged.

"THAT IS ENOUGH OF YOU! I won't hear of it any more! More moonstones would help our cause but a nobler purpose is to right a wrong done to our Ladies of the Lake! Now," he said with fierce finality, glowering at Gandy, "we've come to it. The plan for the final battle." He went to the table and unfolded a large map of the center of Knoll Hilly, a giant mushroom drawn in the middle. All of the possible tunnels, goblin and brownie, and mounds with their underground walls around each enclave were revealed. Most of the brownies turned their attention back to the war plans. Jordan shot Gandy and his band of trouble-makers a dark look. Pilly and Kestar stepped protectively around Anne. Gandy and his band of followers withdrew and skulked away into a corner, humiliated.

"This is a rough map of what it looks like now. From information we got from the prisoners, Morvul and his main hobgoblins reside right within the mushroom ring underneath it, their living quarters around the root system. They have built deep tunnels in that area that lead to a room beneath the Grand Toadstool. They are holding out there. We have them surrounded. My last troupe is placed all around the outer tunnels in the area, the western wall, looking for the rest of the

battalion to join the attack." A tiny yellow pixie flew in and twittered at Mortimer.

"Maisy says all are in position, the wall is breached and we have stood around arguing over who might be a traitor and who isn't! We have lost precious time! Let's go! Maisy, lead the way!" Everyone picked up their weapons and divided into their respective troupes. Pilly once again had Anne and Jordan join up with hers. Anne felt the leather handle of her hammer. It felt warm in her hand. She vowed never to lose it again.

Mortimer moved to the front of the battalion and all followed after him with Maisy, a little yellow beacon, at the head. They wound down the shallow tunnels that ran above, pixies flying and hovering amongst them. They eventually reached a large passage which divided into four doorways, crumbled and nearly ruined. This point was right beneath the major mounds on the surface. The battalion divided into troupes. Pilly's troupe made for the one on the extreme left. As soon as they saw the blasted wall, brownies broke into a wild run to overwhelm it but there were no goblins. The last troupe was also missing.

"What happened?" Asked Jordan.

"They're here, somewhere. They have to be."

"I don't know about this. Seems to me that Mortimer should have had more than one troupe there at the western wall. How can they hold off all the goblins near the toadstool after blasting it?"

"I don't know. I think you're right. We needed more brownies to attack the western wall. But Mortimer rarely listens to anyone." Suddenly the ground fell out from beneath them and they were surrounded by hundreds of hobgoblins. The final battle, proper, began.

Jordan found a perch along a large, length of broken, stacked stones right above the fray and used it to launch his arrows. Anne's hammer became like a silver arc of light as she wielded it, cracking hobgoblin heads. Things became so furious in the melee that none of them realized that they were being herded into a trap.

"Watch out!" Screamed Jordan but it was too late! Nets poured down on them like rain and most of the troupe were caught. Hobgoblins descended on them like hailstones. They were dragged along the ground down into another deep goblin-made tunnel into a massive cave-turned-prison-cell. A hobgoblin tried to grab hold of Jordan but he was too quick for them. He dashed away out of sight, launching a last arrow into the backside of one of the hobgoblin before escaping. A gate of solid stone lowered from the ceiling, closing the prisoners in. They all struggled to disentangle themselves from the nets. Anne was careful not to let *Star* touch anyone. She hid it underneath her arm.

"Well! This is a right, fine mess!" Pilly said angrily. Anne thought that the brownies could use the skill and discipline of the gnomes. Had the gnomes been fighting this battle they would not be in this mess. Far off they could hear the distant cries of other battles.

"We still have our weapons this time." She said. "If only there was a way I could call. . .that's it!" She said excitedly.

"What is it?" Asked Pilly. The others looked to her with hope.

"Antigone! Antigone! Antigone!" She screamed as loudly as she could.

.....

Antigone could hear her name traveling through the air like the call of a war horn but how to get to Anne under the ground in these twisting, turning caves was the thing. She wasn't used to darkness and found herself a little disoriented underground. She found an opening to the surface above ground, climbed out and surveyed the land where she heard and felt the voice. It was near a large group of crumbling stone mounds connected by a series of thatched roofed tunnels all in disarray. She could see the Grand Toadstool a little ways off.

"Well, there's nothing else to do but to dig her out!" Antigone started upon this task when a dark shadow blocked the sunlight above her. She looked up. It was Danzir.

"Danzir! Consorting with troublemakers again, I see." She accused. He looked at her with contempt.

"Always sitting in judgment, Antigone. Perhaps you shouldn't be so quick to assume who is good and who is not. After all, it isn't just the goblins creating mischief here."

"What do you mean?"

"We have a group of brownies working with us as well. It would seem that they don't like mortal, *ahem*, scum? As they so kindly put it? Namely the boy and girl and supposedly brownies who are friendly towards them. They want them out of the picture and were quite willing to make a deal with the goblins to "handle" them. You could say a night pixie told me."

"What!?!?" Antigone exclaimed. Danzir sneered.

"It seems even you do-gooders have your sneaky ways."

"I don't sneak."

"You've always been predictable, Antigone. What is your business here anyway?"

"None of yours."

"I will make it mine."

“You will try.” Danzir flew at her and began ripping at her with his long talons. Antigone rolled back from the force of his attack and her talons grabbed hold of his abdomen. They held each other in a death grip. He ripped wounds from her side and she grabbed hold of his neck with her long tail and squeezed. They struggled mightily against each other and went on this way for seemingly forever, while Anne wondered desperately where Antigone had gone.

Jordan managed to hide himself in a dark crevice, covered in mud, grass and worms. He tried to orient himself as to his whereabouts. He had run blindly to escape capture and now found himself alone and deep into goblin territory. There was a lone, sputtering torch below his hiding place. This tunnel sloped down even farther into the very bowels of the underworld as far as he could tell. Listening out carefully and at first hearing no one coming he started to slip out of the crevice to follow the path down. But he soon heard footfalls. He crouched down in the crevice again. There were two voices, one familiar to him.

"I just don't see why we should be holding a trial in the middle of the war, chief! Why, we could be bombarded any minute! Our caves and tunnels are in tatters!"

"That is precisely why I chose to have the trial now. These traitors are scum! Showing the others what must be done with goblins who consort with the enemy will boost morale. It will be good for the lads to see a public scourging. Gets the blood and the spirit up for more fighting! Besides, their bombs are not powerful enough to reach our deepest tunnels."

"But when they're done with the bombing, there won't be a place for us to dwell!" The first goblin whined.

"That will be as true for them as it will be for us. And in any case, we can simply find some other place to take over. Have you forgotten what it is to be a goblin, Stinkthief? Too much time at the fortress under the King's rule has made you forgetful of what you are! We will hasten the destruction of this place with the last of the Fire Dust. I have acquired something precious. It is a moonstone and I have a secret plan for it and the dust. At midnight."

"What plan, chief?"

"I will tell you after the trial. Their bombs may help them destroy the center of Knoll Hilly. We goblins are survivors, and reapers. We will find other places, nice places to take and live as we please, easily enough." The chief laughed harshly and Stinkthief's high-pitched giggles made Jordan's skin crawl. The two of them descended down the tunnel. Eventually, when he thought it safe, Jordan followed them. The tunnel walls were a crumbling mess with dust and broken roots and dirt sprinkling down from the ceiling. They had dislodged most everything in Knoll Hilly. He had to be very careful. There were places where the ground simply gave way to endless black holes, deep in the earth and how far down they went he didn't know. Roots stuck out like wrenched, old arms. The bombs had created unstable ground. He thought he heard fighting even this far off. He lifted the torch from its sconce and continued. It eventually led him to a long, spiral stone and dirt stair down to a wide cave. This cave, as he got a better look, was filled with hobgoblins.

Jordan wondered what was meant about the Fire Dust plan as he keenly watched the scene before him. He lay the torch down and stayed in the shadows at the top of the stair, heart beating raggedly at the thought he might be seen. He could see nearly all from his vantage point. There were nine hobgoblins chained and standing on a dais and before them were a group of chairs in a semi-circle. Hobgoblins were standing all around the dais. Suddenly the noise hushed as a group of guards push their way through the crowd.

"Make way for the chief!" Shouted Stinkthief. He and three other guards shoved others out of the way as Morvul barreled through the crowd and up the dais. Anne's ring shined like a star around his neck. He also had a fancy war horn tied to his side. And he was wearing a luxurious red cloak. Anne's horn. Jordan thought to try and put an arrow through both him and Stinkthief right then and there but he was too far up and his skill was not accomplished enough. Morvul heaved his weight into the biggest chair in the middle of the semi-circle and the other guards sat around him in front of the standing hobgoblins. The chief mustered up his most threatening and serious voice.

"Goblins, all. We are here to dispense punishment against an enemy! Not the brownie, whom we are fighting on the outside but the enemy within. Traitorous goblins!" Jeers and whistles came from the crowd and much stamping of feet. Bits of rotten food were thrown at the accused. Jordan recognized one of the accused.

"Cowardly-hobs! Cowardly-hobs!" The others chanted.

"Where is your cousin, Gnatty?" Stinkthief demanded, scampering about.

"Far away where he has escaped your clutches!" Gnatty snapped. Stinkthief went up and slapped him in the face, then spat on him.

"Insolence! You will regret that!" Said Stinkthief, giggling wildly. Jordan did not think he could hate Stinkthief anymore than he already did. He was wrong.

"Call the witnesses!" Shouted the chief.

"Witnesses! Witnesses!" Shouted the crowd. Two hobgoblins appeared and stepped up to the dais.

"Come forward!" Said Morvul. "Tell us what you saw these traitors up to." One of the goblins, with a missing ear and eye looked around and grinned at the crowd as if he were getting ready to perform.

"Why, I saw 'em consortin' with brownies many times, 'round them mushroom rings usually, like they were brownies themselves!" The crowd jeered.

"When did you see these things happen?" Asked Stinkthief.

"Oh, I saw it all the time! Night after night just before the war started. Especially Gnatty here, he being the ringleader and all!"

“And what else have you seen?”

“I've seen all of 'em even taking baths and using perfumes made from flower petals! Nearly every week! Like they was fairies or somethin'! Once, I saw this one here gardenin' and growin' plants!” A collective gasp rose up from the crowd.

“Baths? *Baths! Horrors!* Not be endured, I tell you! Have you no shame? Have you forgotten what you are? You. Are. Goblins! We don't bathe, nor do we work! You have forgotten yourselves. This is what happens when goblins consort with brownies and other non-goblin folk. They began to think themselves other than what they are. Like they're better than the rest of us! The proud goblin traditions have all been disrespected by these *half-goblins!*” Shouted Morvul in disgust. He cleared his throat and spat on the ground in front of his chair in dramatic flair and wrung his hands. This drew wild cheers and jeers from the crowd. He then turned to the witness.

“Thank you, Gru. You may step down.” He turned to Gnatty. “What have you to say for yourself?”

“May I speak plainly?”

“That depends.”

“We will all be accused no matter what, so I will!” Said Gnatty angrily. He turned his back on the chief and addressed the crowd. “Goblins since old times have been varied and different from each other as a stinkweed is to a rose. We are not all the same nor have we ever all been the same! My great-grandmother took baths all of the time it was no strange thing in our family. And I have a great uncle who was famous for growing his own barley and making the best bread this side of the southern forests. Many of you knew him. It is no shame or an un-goblin trait to bathe or garden or to do something nice to others. Goblins have always prided themselves in being independent folk. So why have we become so obsessed with following the crowd? So dependent on chiefs telling us what to do and where to go? Where is your independence? Can you even think for yourselves anymore? Will you? If doing those things make you hate me then I will live with it and I am not ashamed of them but I am every bit as goblin as all of you and proud of it. We are not all the same and we of the Peace Brigade are not the real cowardly-hobs. We don't cower under a bully!” This enraged the crowd and they tried to rush the dais but the guards held them back. Morvul sniffed and waved his hand at Gnatty in a dismissive gesture.

“You test my patience! You are *not* true goblins, though you have goblin blood in you. You are fakes! Lothe,” The chief looked at one of Gnatty's companions, “I know you are solitary, but the rest of you! What about your families? What will they say? You shame them and yourselves with your self-hatred!” Said the chief.

“I will say what I must and then you can do what you like! I say this: I am a goblin through and through! Every bit as you! Why must you dictate how we all must be?”

“Because it has been our way since the beginning! It is our tradition of behavior that defines us as goblins. All goblins everywhere are this way. To dispute that is to dispute nature and reason itself. That cannot be tolerated!”

“Of course not. You cannot conceive of someone doing anything different from what you know because you have all the power. You are a bully!” Said Lothe.

“You dare rebuke me?”

“I do.” The chief turned to the second witness.

“You! What did you see these traitors doing?” The second goblin stepped forward and spat on Lothe.

“I saw them one night showing some brownies some of our hidden tunnels, places no brownie ought to be. Showing 'em the layout of the place.” Deafening shouts of outrage rang through the cave.

“That's a lie! He is clearly lying!” Cried Gnatty but his cries were drowned out. Jordan was so angry he didn't know what to do. Right before his eyes he was witnessing what he'd heard his dad call a Kangaroo Court. All of the goblins present were shouting wildly: “Scourge them! Scourge them!”

“Giss, take them away and scourge them right good! Then throw them all back into the dungeon with the brownies we captured at the wall. They will all roast at dawn!” Morvul shouted. He then beat his chest in what seemed to Jordan false anguish and Stinkthief danced and jigged around the accused goblins, slapping and kicking them and laughing maniacally. Jordan could finally see a difference, what Anne saw before. Not all of them were bad. Certainly not the Peace Brigade but they were being railroaded. He wondered what Morvul would do with them and wondered what a scourging was. It couldn't be good. The false witnesses jeered at the accused as they were led away.

“Back to your posts! We have a war to win!” Morvul shouted. Then the chief rose and the other guards rose with him. Stinkthief scampered near to him and they left the cave. The other hobgoblins began to disperse back to their posts. No one came up the stairs, to his relief. *I have to find out what they mean to do with the Fire Dust! How far do these tunnels actually go?* When all was silent Jordan crept down the stairs, bow and arrow in hand. He followed down the doorway he saw the chief go through which led to what seemed like a giant furnace. Above him were chimneys and below that a massive fire pit. Hobgoblins were dancing around the pit and throwing handfuls of the red dust into a monstrous stone cauldron. Boiling water, putrid and lurid with red smoke and vapors made it look like something out of a nightmare. He could see the chief standing and watching over the activity. His cloak looked like a thick slab of blood. He reached into his pocket and drew something out. It glinted for a moment, some sort of pendent. Jordan got the sinking suspicion that it was a moonstone. *He doesn't even need the brownies to bomb this place! All he needs to do is throw that in!* Jordan glanced to the left and he saw, sitting in a large prison cell with the Peace Brigade were Pilly's troupe, the missing troupe. And Anne. They were all sitting along the back wall. Jordan couldn't see how he could get down to them without being caught. He looked

around for another way. A glowing light moved towards him from the doorway above. He fixed an arrow on it, fearing it to be a threat but it turned out to be Lito and a small group of day pixies.

"Thank God!" Lito and his fellow pixies twittered in their incomprehensible language to him. He looked at them helplessly. Lito tugged at his tunic and the others began doing the same. They eventually managed to lift him up and away towards one of the holes in the tunnel wall. Lito then pointed down, then pointed at him.

"But where does it lead?" Lito's tiny hands began to glow and he spelled out E-N-N-A in the air in glowing letters.

"Enna? What's... oh!" The pixies began to glow brightly and they picked him up again and flew him down the hole. They soon found themselves on the ground floor. They were behind the fire cauldron in a recessed hole. Here, he could see the prisoners clearly, just beneath him through a crude and filthy grate.

"Psst. Psst." He whispered. Some of them looked up.

"Jordan!" Whispered Anne excitedly. She stood up.

"Shhh! I'm going to find a way out!"

"Be careful!" Lito hovered by his side, his little group behind him. There was a guard around the corner.

"I need you guys to distract the guard by the cell door so I can get the door open." Jordan said to the pixies. Lito saluted and said something to his troops. They swirled into a cloud of color and swarmed over the hobgoblin guarding the cell. The guard stumbled, waving about, trying to wave them off. They began biting and tearing at his flesh. Jordan sneaked up behind him, snatched the club from his side and knocked his head with it. The guard fell down unconscious and Jordan fished for his pocket knife and unlocked the door. Pilly immediately took command of all of the brownies.

"We'll have to get reinforcements. There aren't enough of us to fight the goblins down here!"

"The chief is planning something big at midnight! That red dust they've been using? He has a moonstone and he's going to use it with the dust to do something really foul!" Said Jordan.

"He has a moonstone?" Asked Anne.

"Yeah. He plans to destroy the whole place with it."

"Which means he knows he's been defeated." Said Pilly.

"Maybe. But he plans to take the whole place down with him before he leaves."

"Is that what they're doing? The singing and chanting?"

"Yes! They are all making some kind of potion in a huge vat over a fire with the red dust."

"If only I could get my horn! Hey, I have an idea." Said Anne.

"Anne this is not the time to separate!" Warned Pilly.

"But the horn! If I can get the horn and blow it anything that can come to my aid will come, which means we all get help! The tunnels are a collapsed mess. We might not find the other troops in time or even find our way out of here!" Pilly looked at the other troupe lieutenant.

"We'll follow you, Pilly." He said.

"Alright. So, Gabb and I will take the others and find reinforcements and you will try to get this horn? Jordan?" Asked Pilly.

"I'll go with Anne."

"Lito! You and yours help Anne and Jordan get that horn!" Said Pilly. Gnatty spoke up.

"We can be of assistance to Anne and Jordan. We know these tunnels and secret rooms and where the chief hides the things the goblins steal." Pilly and the rest of the troupes were off.

"What do we do? That guard will wake up soon."

"We know a secret way into the chief's treasure chamber. Follow us." They followed the hobgoblins past the fallen guards, pixies in tow. They found themselves going down even further until they came to a hall with a door.

"Shhhh. I don't have my key. They are at my quarters." Said Gnatty. Jordan stepped forward and deftly picked the lock. They went inside to a very modest living quarters. They went behind a curtain and into a small hall filled with pictures. Gnatty turned to Anne and Jordan.

"One of the portraits on the other side of the door has peepholes behind the eyes. It's behind this one. The one of my dear mother." The hobgoblin pointed to the portrait of an old, smiling goblin woman with a yellow flower sitting in her tuft of white hair.

"The next room is where the chief keeps his booty."

"Really?" Asked Anne. She moved the portrait and peeked through the eye holes in the wall. Sure enough, it was a room filled with treasure. Morvul was inside, sitting by a large writing desk, fondling a jewel in his clawed hand. It was the pendent Lady Whitestone had given her. It's light did not seem to disturb him one whit. And strapped to his crude belt under his cloak was the horn that Prince Efosa had given her. He took off the horn and set it on the table. Another hobgoblin came into the room.

"Chief! Supper is ready."

"About time. I'll need all my strength for midnight tonight!" He pushed himself from the table, got up, adjusted his cape with a flourish and strode out.

"He's gone. How do we get in?" Whispered Anne.

“Be careful not to make noise. Come.” Gnatty led them to a floor length painting of a moonlit scene by the Mirrored Lake. Slowly, they opened the narrow door.

“On the other side of this is a mirror. Seeli, check the peepholes. Make sure no one has entered the room.”

“All is clear.” Said Seeli. They slipped in and Anne grabbed her horn. The room was full of stolen objects; clothes, jewels, old toys and dolls, old shoes, stale candy, hats, books and mirrors. It was an odd assortment of things taken from many people. Some so old Anne wasn't sure of what time period they were made.

“Why does he have all these things?”

“We goblins like to collect things. It's in our nature. Some collect found things and others steal. Morvul is especially corrupt. In order for hobgoblins to stay under his protection and not have the things we find – or steal in the case of most goblins - taken, hobgoblins give tribute to larger more powerful goblins like him. Goblins from large clans or families do not fear bigger goblins but solitary ones or those of us from small families form gangs under a chief goblin, one who is the biggest and baddest and in return the smaller goblins get to keep most of what they find.” They left the room by the secret door and filed back into the hall.

“We have to find the surface. I have no idea if it will work underground.” Said Anne. Right then they heard a cry. The goblins had found about the escape!

“FIND THEM!” They could hear Morvul roar.

“Oh no! They're coming this way! We can't go back the way we came!” Cried Lothe.

“Anne, wait before you blow the horn! Wait until we can get closer to the surface.” Said Gnatty.

“Do you know how to use weapons?” Asked Jordan.

“We do.”

“Use this.” Jordan handed him the prison guard's club.

“Is there a way out of here through the chief's room?”

“Yes.” They went back into the room and out a hall with many doorways leading out from it. They heard footfalls of hobgoblins headed in their direction but Anne felt stronger and braver than ever. She fastened her horn to her belt and had *Star* at the ready. As soon as they ascended up the hall to the next level they met with a band of hobgoblin guards. The guards lept at them. The pixies swarmed and went into action with Anne's hammer doing most of the clearing. Goblins fell before her hammer, afraid of its poisonous iron. Her anger made it even more powerful and it began to glow bright white. Jordan's arrows flew and stung like long, sharp teeth.

“Traitors!” Screamed one of the guards at Gnatty and his friends.

“We are not traitors!” He swung the club. More guards were coming.

“Quick! We can't fight them all!” Yelled Anne. After subduing the first group they ran farther up until they reached a thatched-roof tunnel. Anne pulled out her horn. *It's now or never!* They heard guards pouring up from the deep. And then there was an earth shattering boom that threw everyone off their feet.

“We're running out of tunnels!” Said Jordan, getting back up. “If these bombs touch that stuff they were making down there it will create the mother of all explosions! It'll destroy all of Knoll Hilly!” Anne took up her horn and blew it. At first it was only a reedy, thin sound but as she continued to blow the symbols on the horn began to glow brightly. The horn sounded louder and louder and deeper. It was a wild, primitive sound like hundreds of wailing and braying rams. It was a frightening sound and it became deafening as it grew, so much so that all who heard it were forced to the ground through the sheer force of it. Except its blower. The guards were temporarily immobilized, even as the sound died away. And then they heard another, more distant sound. The sound of rocks, roots and bone pouring into Knoll Hilly to mount a defense of its destruction.

It was late evening and the sun was sinking fast beneath the horizon. Night was coming. Night, which weakened brownies and strengthened and emboldened the goblins. Antigone and Danzir had been at battle for long time when high above she heard a fierce cry. Danzir gasped, the air slowly seeping from his throat as her tail squeezed. His talons fell from her as he struggled against her tightening grip. It was Aes. Like a falling boulder he hurled himself into the embattled Gryps, stabbing Danzir with his sharp beak. Danzir gave a choked off cry and let go. Quick as a snake Antigone was on his back clawing while her brother stabbed mercilessly. Danzir, beleaguered and now terrified that he might die squawked pitifully and tried to fly off. Antigone held on doggedly.

"Foul fiend! Now that the tide is turned you turn tail and fly!" She ripped a sizable piece of flesh from his back and Aes snapped off a cloud of feathers from his right wing. But they heard cries of a strange sort. They let Danzir go and he hopped and hobbled across a mound then finally flew off.

"What was that?" She asked.

"A war cry of some sort. A horn, I think. I heard it just a moment ago as I was flying and it drew me here. Then I saw you in battle with Danzir. I felt drawn by an invisible hand to this place," He said, looking around for the first time, "desolate looking as it is."

"It is the result of the war between the brownies and goblins. Let us follow the horn call." Said Antigone. Aes followed her as they went in search of the sound. Just over a hill and at the site of mounds just outside the center of Knoll Hilly they saw Anne, Jordan, a few hobgoblins and Pilly with the troupes. Anne was blowing the curved goat's horn. All across the land they could see brownies coming to her side, pixies and even animals. There were far more brownies present than anyone had ever seen and they were coming in waves.

"A strange power!" Said Antigone. The goblins that had chased them out of the tunnels were now surrounded on all sides and every creature called by the horn attacked them. The fighting grew thick and fierce. It sent half of the goblin army running off into the woods and the rest back into the tunnels. Now that all of the brownie troupes were gathered at last, Mortimer stood upon one of the shattered mounds. Anne took this time to look around at the land of Knoll Hilly. It was strewn with animal bones, blasted and scorched, holes overflowing with backed-up filth from the lower tunnels. She shook her head and tried to put the desolation out of her mind.

"We have one more bomb and with it we will breach the last underground wall where they have fled. Our time has come! We take back our homes!" A shout of jubilation rose.

"Onward!" Shouted Mortimer. Gnatty and his crew searched for Anne.

"I suppose it is time for us to take our leave." Anne was worried about where they could actually go. It seemed the goblins were now trapped within and they were surrounded by brownie enemies. Sure enough, Anne's thoughts proved to be true.

"What are they doing here?" Screamed Gandy. He pointed to the hobgoblins that had escaped with Anne and Jordan.

"Why should these filthy creatures dare to even be here at our moment of triumph?"

"Because they helped us to fight and escape prison!" Shouted Anne.

"What do you mean? Pilly! What is she talking about?"

"They were thrown in prison right along with us. It would be wrong to mistreat them!"

"Since when?" Cried Gandy becoming more shrill by the second.

"They were *our* allies in prison!" Said Anne.

"Anne is right." Said Pilly.

"They had to go through a fake trial and were imprisoned for refusing to help the other goblins. They are allies." Said Jordan.

"*Your* allies!"

"Silence!" Shouted Mortimer. "Goblins cannot be trusted on their own to tell the truth. However, if you say, you three say these are truly against the destruction of our homes. . ." He came down off the mound and faced the Peace Brigade down with a hard stare.

"I don't like goblins of ANY sort. However, some that I trust insist you are different from the rest of your ilk. So, you were thrown in prison with Pilly and these others? Is this true?" He asked. Gnatty fixed him with a suspicious look.

"It is true."

"You do realize that regardless of that, we are on opposite sides because of who we are?"

"I don't understand. . ." Said Gnatty.

"Of course you don't. You're a goblin." He glanced at the battalions standing around. "Tie them up and put them in a hole, near the main wall." They were tied up and carried off. Anne felt helpless and frustrated.

"Pilly, this is unfair!"

"I don't like it either but we are fighting a war Anne." Pilly sighed. "We'll sort this all out when things are over. I don't see any other way except alienating the other brownies if we persist. We'll have to solve this by some other way. Secretly

maybe.”

“Yeah. Secretly.” Said Anne. Mortimer gave the call to move and the battalions moved forward towards the Grand Toadstool. *When will all of this be over?* She wondered unhappily.

The sun had gone down but a few weak rays still held the dying light of evening when they had arrived at the pinnacle of the fight, the center of Knoll Hilly, the Grand Toadstool. It was huge, with its bright red top and white spots shining like lights on the red cap. The stem was glowing with a strange lurid, red light and all around it, slowly spreading from the ground near the toadstool was the red mist. The mist crept along the ground, spreading itself like some inexorable disease. This forced the brownies to halt. The day pixies had long since gone.

“They would destroy even the Grand Toadstool?” Whispered Pilly in horror. Mushrooms everywhere along the ground were turning red, glowing and pulsing like odd lights from the ground. Some were beginning to shrivel and turn black.

“They mean to destroy all of your food and all the land around so no one can have it. They knew we would eventually retake Knoll Hilly. Don't touch them.” Said Anne. Antigone and Aes had fallen in step with the brownies traveling alongside, quiet observers of the destruction of the red dust. Their eyes gleamed bright in the dusk.

“It destroys all vegetation it touches. It might even burn and eat through flesh and blood. Except for the goblins. They seem immune to it.” Said Antigone. Mortimer waved it off.

“Ready the bomb!” He said but before they could, they heard a shout. A figure was standing atop the Grand Toadstool. It was the goblin chief, Morvul.

“Knoll Hilly is mine! You will never have it. Do you see the red? It is the Fire Dust of the Fairy King. The King himself is on his way. Did you know? He and his host go forth again and he is coming! The dust has destroyed this place, your precious mounds and rocks and mushrooms. All the land! Leave now and maybe your lives will be spared. Leave and. . .” Antigone and Aes cried in indignation and they both flew at Morvul.

“Danzir, Danzir, Danzir!” He cried in fright as he had barely taken notice of them during his gloating.

“Do not call for him! He will not be back, brigand!” Shouted Antigone. The chief dove down in a hole in the toadstool's cap just in time before he could be torn to pieces.

“What shall we do Mortimer?” Said Pilly.

“The land will heal itself one day. With our help. The Grand Toadstool has been poisoned. Employ the bomb.” Said Mortimer resolutely. The others looked on in consternation as they pointed the cannon at the toadstool. Several brownies carrying a cannon and several cannon balls that looked like miniature moons the size of basketballs set to making preparations.

“Watch the dust, now. Don't get too close!” Warned Mortimer. Anne glanced at the sky. The Fairy King was back? Was he really coming or was Morvul trying to frighten them? The sky was a deep shade of violet. Even the moons seemed to have a reddish tinge to them. A color for war. Stars shined like sharp pinpoints of light with no hint or tinge of red. She felt a mixture of fear and hope. Grandma Veronica's brown ribbon fluttered in the breeze. Too many things had gone wrong and she wasn't sure how to fix it anymore. She had gone in to set matters straight respecting Stinkthief and found herself embroiled in a big mess which didn't seem like it would right itself. She saw Jordan readying his own weapon and she felt guilty for even involving him in Other Land matters. But what was done was done. The bomb was launched clear at the giant toadstool exploding it on impact. The mushroom split apart and burst into a thick red mist. Noxious feathers of fumes shot up. Goblins poured out of the hole it left to make their last stand as the brownies ringed the center of Knoll Hilly. The ground became wet, murky and muddy and they were all soon covered in red, itchy mud as the night fell in. Some goblins had been beaten and chased off but they were unable to dislodge the chief's core force from the mound city. Above, Antigone and Aes attacked fleeing goblins unlucky enough to cross their path. Anne managed to push through the breach and began beating back hobgoblins along with Pilly and Kestar when a pair of large, red eyes peering at the battle from the woods flew in like a bolt of lightning. It was Danzir and he flew straight at Anne!

“Anne! Watch out!” Screamed Jordan. She momentarily looked up but was trapped between goblins and a broken mound. Jordan jumped atop the mound, steadied himself and stilled his panic as the Gryp came in. He then saw Jordan and changed direction, coming for him. Jordan took an arrow from his quiver, loaded and nocked it. Focusing all his energy and concentration, all he could see was Danzir's great black wings descending down on him. Suddenly the arrow in his hand lit up like a stream of fire and he raised, drew it and let it fly. The fire arrow found its mark right in Danzir's abdomen, piercing through his tough scales. Danzir screeched in pain and rage. Anne smashed her hammer down on one of his claws. The iron burned and corroded the talons and two of them crumbled and fell off. Aes was on him in a flash followed by Antigone. They dragged him off the battlefield and together picked him up and threw him into the woods where he went limping away into the dark, in humiliation once again. But not before making his final threat, his eyes full of hate.

“You haven't won you worm ridden vermin! The Fairy King comes! He comes again and when he does, he and his host will swallow you all whole in his wake!” He disappeared. Stinkthief and Morvul, seeing their powerful ally defeated became enraged. The brownies were tired and battle weary as the night drew on while the goblins gained strength. Stinkthief called forth the night pixies to help them. The sound of thousands of tiny voices screaming grew louder. They

were coming.

“Eat them alive! Eat them all!” Demanded Stinkthief. Swarms of them came from the woods. Lito and his kind, being pixies of dawn and day were not there to stem the tide.

“What will we do now?” cried Pilly. “Only to lose at the last moment! All this way, to lose now?” *If only I could get to Stinkthief!* Anne thought but she was too far away and blocked by too much fighting. Anne felt for her horn. She drew a deep breath. The high pitched screams of the approaching night pixies grew shrill and nearly unbearable. Many brownies, afraid of being bitten to death began to flee, covering their ears at the horrible sound. She saw Stinkthief through the red haze coming towards her, his eyes glittering. She recalled how he fouled her home and the discord between mama and dad that he caused. Then she blew into it with all her might. The sound was a furious bellowing that made the very air vibrate and turn colors. The rest of the ruined mounds shook and collapsed completely. The ground quaked and the sound rolled like a tidal wave through the air; the sound of hundreds of crashing boulders and horns. And then there was silence as Anne ran out of breath and fell to the ground in exhaustion. Everyone looked around in confusion and fear. The horn shined bright in her hand like a beacon and suddenly as if in answer, a wide ray of light shot out from the eastern sky. The night pixies scattered like mist in the sun. The horizon dawned with light, though it was too early for the dawn. It came like the lifting of heavy drapes. The goblins stared in shock. Summer dawn was here, at last.

The moons faded as the sun, though not yet risen threw up its rays. In the east they saw what looked like a brilliant jewel, crowning. Something else peculiar happened. The chief goblin began to quake and tremble uncontrollably.

“No! Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!” He cried and grabbed his chest in pain. The ring had stopped glowing but the yellow jewel set in it began to shine like a tiny sun, blinding him. He covered his eyes and tried to claw at it, to fling it off but it burned him each time he touched it. In the distant eastern sky approaching on the clouds and mists of dawn were stallions of flame and fire leading a great golden chariot and in it sat a woman, most glorious. She had golden skin and hair as bright as red flame and shining eyes like brilliant citrine jewels. She and a vast retinue of fairies traveling behind her chariot on horses of mist and air and at her side, all with eyes of fire descended. The fire stallions dashed towards the battlefield and eventually touched ground. They whinnied proudly as she drove them forth, drew up her chariot and stood surveying the battlefield. She gazed at the chief.

“The ring, there.” Her voice was melodious and bright but commanding.

“Y . . .yes?” He quivered.

“Why do you have it? It is not yours.”

“I . . . I found it. Goblin law. Finders Keepers, Losers Weepers.” She stared hard at him and he withered under her gaze.

“Since when did goblins heed any law? I do not recognize any goblin law when it harms those under my protection. I recognize the stone that I myself set in it. It was never meant for *you*.” She said this last word with special emphasis. The word rang like hundreds of bells clanging and ringing. The stone grew so bright that the chief's face was obscured by light and suddenly he burst into flames then dissipated in the air in a curl of black, noxious smoke. The goblin chief was no more! At this the hobgoblins all cried out in terror but it was too late. Anne spied Stinkthief who trampled and stampeded over the other hobgoblins in his hurry to escape.

“If you are to finish this imps, make haste!” Called Antigone to the brownies. Anne was jubilant at the sight of the Summer Queen and she bounded over to the spot where the chief had stood and grabbed her ring. She looked up at the Queen, whose face was bathed in brilliant radiance. But though all else could not look upon her directly in her full glory Anne saw her face and she smiled.

“Go and subdue your enemies!” She said. Anne charged after Stinkthief. Jordan merely stood in astonishment at his first look at a fairy queen.

“Where are you going!” She shouted finally catching up with Stinkthief. “Stand and fight!” The brownies were now swarming back and in came Lito and pixies of dawn and day. Stinkthief turned and picked up out a nasty looking rusted scythe, snarling at her. Anne stood to meet him, unafraid. He brought his scythe down at her swiftly. She blocked it with her hammer getting a blow on her arm but it was deflected by her armor. The scythe flew up and sliced way a thin part of skin from her cheek. Blood streamed down but she felt no pain as they battled back and forth. The gem in her ring shined so brightly that it blinded Stinkthief.

“You will pay for what you did to me and Jordan, Stinkthief!” She raised *Star* and smashed him square on the head. He stumbled, screamed and fell unconscious. The wound left by the iron hammer festered and bubbled with gray and black flesh and blood. His ear melted off. The brownies routed the goblins and sent them fleeing for their lives, their plans destroyed and their leaders dead or in flight. In all, it took a mere hour after the arrival of summer and the battle of dusk and dawn was finally over.

“Anne, you're bleeding.” Said Jordan.

“So are you. It will heal.” She said. Mortimer nodded happily.

“All things will heal now.” He said with confidence. She gathered with Jordan, Pilly and Mortimer, Daren, Kestar and the others and all the brownies made their way back to the ruined Grand Toadstool where the Summer Queen and her stallions stood . From her radiant light shined but this time it was much softer now that the battle was done. However, she remained still and stern.

“Heal? You mistake my coming, imp. I have come to herald summer in the west of the world and sooner than I would have because of Anne's call for help. This work, this destructive thing you have made from the gifts of Lady Grey is a travesty. Neither she or Lady Pearl are pleased. I have a mind to scorch this portion of earth forever, cursing it and you.”

“But great queen. . .” Mortimer began.

“Silence! Anne herself has unknowingly pleaded your cause with the Lady Moons by giving back the moonstones. It would seem to appease the Lady Moons but I am not happy to see such destruction.”

“But we only wanted our home back!”

“And I do not fault you for that. However, had you appealed to me for help instead of abusing the moonstones this land would not be full of sores now. We could have come to some agreement, surely, even if you are not summerfolk. Why did you take so long to seek your homes? And bombs? Now, after you have helped the goblins destroy it you expect me to heal it? To wave my hands over mushroom and mound and make things as they once were?”

“Can you not do so?”

"I can and will not! If I chose to, I would require a tithe and that tithe would be very great, a price you could not pay. The land will heal but you shall work hard for it! Every blade of grass, every plant, flower, toadstool and rock shall you heal and bring back to life with your own hands. I shall aid with sunlight but you shall do the work and it will be the hardest work you have ever done. It will be many years before things are set right again."

"But the red dust! The goblins' red dust, oh queen! What can we do?" cried Pilly.

"It is not something that cannot be undone. What is dust but an element of the earth? Do not worry over it for the land will heal, but do the work."

"My great lady. . . " Gandy pushed his way forward and began.

"Queen." The Queen corrected.

"My great queen," He began again.

"I am not your queen." Gandy stammered and hesitated, looking around, then he began again. His troupe pressed in with him yanking along the Peace Brigade in chains.

"There is still the matter of these goblins here." He said.

"What of them? Release them or do what you will." She said. At this the goblins began to wail and sob in earnest. Gandy jerked their chains violently.

"If I may clarify the matter, good Queen." Said Antigone. She flew up to the Queen's chariot and bowed.

"These nine goblins, vouchsafed by Anne and Jordan refused to take part in the fight with the other goblins against the brownies. They showed themselves allies to me, my brother and to Anne and Jordan. It must also be said that the wicked goblins were in league with a Gryp named Danzir. I heard it from Danzir's own beak that a group of imps," she said turning and glancing at Gandy, "worked with him to capture the mortal children and Pilly and her troupe and throw them into prison. Had fortune not smiled on them they would now be dead by goblins hands." The others looked on in shock at Gandy.

"A foul lie! We did no such thing!" He cried shrill and his friends around him protested.

"My sister tells no lie and neither do I. 'Tis true, Queen Titian. The brownies have traitors in their midst and *these* are they." Aes glared at Gandy and his friends. The Queen stared at them, her eyes burning.

"Antigone and Aes, I know you both of old and your characters. I also know when a person lies and when they speak truth. Tell me, Gandy, do they lie on you? Truly?" She fixed him and his friends with her bright, searing gaze. Gandy winced and faltered.

"I . . . I . . . well. . . I . . . Danzir. . . He. . . ." The Queen lifted her hand to silence him.

"Enough. You lie. You sold your own people and their allies, the mortal children, out, and for what?" Finally he scraped together enough courage to speak.

"Mortals have no business in our world! They are inferior to us, they do not deserve to come here and meddle in our affairs!" The Queen lifted a thin brow.

"Yet, we have gone in and out of theirs for ages untold. Why should they not do the same? Now you would proclaim such long, unspoken traditions wrong on your own and bar the doors shut? Who gave you such a thought?"

"But you are so fair, so powerful and fine! Why should corrupt humans even gaze upon you? They foul their world and they will soon foul ours!"

"The same way you brownies have fouled your own land? The same corruption that led you to betray your own? I wonder where humans get such traits? Yes, I am fair and if I desire mortals to look upon me that is for me to decide. Our world and the mortal one was once one world. There was no difference. The paths have become harder to find and longer to travel. Those who find them are blessed, indeed. That is the way of it. Who are you to decide anything else? Will you consult the First Law? The Powers That Be? Perhaps you need a lesson in walking in the shoes of others – those you have deemed beneath you, little imps. You and your treacherous group that hate mortals so, who have betrayed your kin to goblins shall be banished from Other Land and roam the world as mortals for a time. It shall be an age before you see the fairy world again. Changelings of a kind, you shall be, nor will you be allowed to come back until your hearts have changed. Now, get you gone!" With a wave of her hand and a flash of light from her eyes Gandy and his conspirators were gone.

"What will happen to them?" Asked Anne.

"The same trials and tribulations that happen to all mortals. They will know mortal life; pain, suffering, happiness, longing, difficulties that only mortals know and finally death. If they have learned the lesson they may join the world of the fair folk."

"What about all those goblins that created this mess?"

"Do you wish to punish them further? Very well. I say this! Any goblin that sets foot on Knoll Hilly or any other brownie haunt with wicked intent towards them will go the way of the goblin chief!" As a reminder she stretched out her hand and caused the ground to tremble. Another giant toadstool grew from the spot of the dead one, yet it was deformed, ugly not beautiful like the first one. It was shaped like the goblin chief.

"Let it be a reminder to all. No goblin may enter here to do harm, destroy or take anything or they will suffer the consequences. And let it be a reminder to brownies to never be lazy or careless about caring for what is given to them." She

rebuked.

“But Queen Titian, not all of the goblins are bad.” Said Anne.

“Yes. I have not forgotten.” She gazed at the Peace Brigade and their chains fell off.

“What say you?” She asked Gnatty.

“Great Queen, I am Gnatty, leader of the Peace Brigade. We only want to remain here. This is our home, the only one we've known. We have just as much right to live here as the brownies. Our folk moved here ages ago. We don't want war with the brownies. Only our homes and some peace.”

“And where is your home in this place?”

“On the edge, near the woods.”

“I shall leave it to the brownies to decide these matters. Only that I will say this: Any goblin prisoners you have that have committed no crime against you, release them, or I will not release the fruitage of this land to you. These peaceful ones here, treat them with respect and allow place for them here. I do not want to hear of any more wars or skirmishes between your folk. What say you, Mortimer?” She turned that bright gaze on him.

“I will take no issue with them living here.” Said Mortimer humbly.

“Neither do I!” Said Pilly.

“Good. It will be up your duty to treat them respectfully, as they have lived here and called it home all their lives, just as you do.” Said the Summer Queen.

“And now since I have been called forth early,” She rested her gaze on Anne and smiled, “let summer begin.”

.....

The Gryps groomed and washed themselves, getting ready to travel along with the Summer Queen and her court as she readied herself to go on progress.

“I feel we ought to have finished the job with Danzir, brother, but ‘tis such a glorious start to the summer season. Such a wondrous thing has happened with Queen Titian arriving. 'Tis no longer a killing day for me.”

“Ay, Antigone, I agree. I do not have the heart to put an end to Danzir, though he deserves it. I fear he will make more trouble in the future.”

“And we will be there to repay him.” Said Antigone. One of the fairy ladies of the Queen's retinue approached the Gryps.

“We shall have a celebration for days! The Queen asks if there is anything special you and your brother would like for your invaluable help, Antigone?” Antigone and Aes looked at each other and then at her.

“We hail from the Mountains of the Sky, a place notoriously scarce of substantial food sources. My brother and I would like good slabs of meat, if you please. None of that vegetable business for us!” Said Antigone.

The Summer Queen and her host made their way with great fanfare to the Great Hall, the massive hollowed out tree stump that sat within a fairy ring. She had invited the children to ride with her in her chariot. Conch shell horns blew in the far distance. Anne thought of the mermaids.

“That's the Queen of Summer?” Asked Jordan. Anne nodded happily.

“Wow.” In the Summer Queen's presence, everyone felt joyful and happy and reflected a small part of her radiance. Even covered in mud Jordan seemed transformed by seeing her. Like a blond fairy child. Anne wondered if she went through this same transformation when she first saw the Summer Queen.

The Great Hall had never looked more magical. Instead of cobwebs there were streams and garlands of flowers that hung from the walls and from the invisible ceiling. Light filled the hall.

“It is grand to see you once again child, but I meant to ask, who is this one with you?”

“My friend, Jordan.”

“Welcome, Jordan!” Jordan was too tongue-tied to say anything. The Queen called to the birds, the insects, and the fairy folk to feast with her for she was now reigning in the west once again. The fairy lords hunted down and roasted a wild boar for the Gryps.

“And you, children, must be adorned well for you are guests most honored.” They were taken to a glade, bathed and clothed in the finery of summer. Anne in a dress made of pink hydrangeas and Jordan in a brilliant green tunic of leaves and fine green silk. Anne's hair was cleaned, combed and wreathed in the finest, delicate violets and when they were ready they were brought before the Queen who presided at the great table, shining like a day star. She wore her golden circlet decorated with emeralds and citrines. And a gown made of the brightest, most beautiful yellow roses and a luxurious cape of fern fronds dotted with sparkling dew drops. All of the fruit of summer and spring were displayed before them. And in the center of the table sat a familiar bowl full of magic seeds. All had come full circle. Zi and Mera had come and all their friends from their tree home. The children stayed and ate and played until late evening.

“Zi! You won't believe what happened!”

“You've been on your own adventure again?”

“Yes!” She related to him the brownie/goblin war and what the goblins did to her home.

“I'm sorry I couldn't be there for you, Anne.” He said, looking guilty.

“Well, you can't do everything. I managed. With Jordan's help.”

“I am glad you both came. You must come often in the summer! It is most beautiful here when Queen Titian reigns.” Said Zi wistfully.

“I'll be back. Don't worry about that. You have to come visit me this summer too, Zi.” Anne said. She thought of the mermaids and their wondrous palaces of shell and coral and the regal sound of their great conch horns.

“I'm so glad you showed me this place. I can do things I only imagined and dreamed about back home.” Said Jordan.

The Queen took a silver spoon and tapped a crystal goblet.

“Come all and join me in song and dance. Rejoice with me for the year was dark and hard but light has come. Give praise for life, love and laughter, for good things and joyful hearts – hearts like the brave heart of Anne Greene. It was she who rescued me from the clutches of eternal darkness.” The Queen's voice was the pleasant sound of peeling silver bells. Fireflies and pixies, even the night and dusk ones came to bask in her glory and beauty and to celebrate.

And none threatened or caused any mischief in the Great Hall. A song was sang by all, music and voices as joyful as the magical music from the Realm of the Baobabs:

You fair folk with dark thoughts
and devious deeds be not seen;
goblins and Gryps, do no wrong
come not near our fairy queen.

Sing to our queen
a song of summer
sing to our queen, so fair
a song of splendor

dark fairies come not here;
away you minions of Queen Faye, away!
Hosts of Alberich, come not near
dark minions, do not stay!

Sing to our queen
a song of summer
sing to our queen, so fair
a song of splendor.

Yet, with all of the singing and dancing Anne was alert. She had not forgotten the goblin chief's threat. The Queen's stallions rounded the Great Hall relentlessly in a wide circle and both of them suddenly reared up as if challenging opponents. She saw shadows moving among the woods towards the Summer Queen's hall. Anne ran back inside the Great Hall.

“Someone approaches!” She warned. Antigone went and stood by the doorway like a sentinel. Anne went to Antigone's side and Jordan followed. Queen Titian did not appear disturbed though everyone fell silent. The Fairy King and his host encircled the tree just outside the ring, staying just beyond reach of the fiery stallions. The fairy ring was engulfed in a circle of flame, a protective barrier around the hall. The great steed Night Sky bared his teeth at them as they stood in front of him, silent and threatening but he dared not set hoof beyond the ring. The King got down from his horse and the Queen's stallions made way for him and a few of his children. Then the circle of fire closed around them again. King Alberich strode into the hall. Anne stayed close to Antigone. The King glanced at Jordan and Anne, a flicker of recognition, a cruel look, but he did not stop or address them. A small retinue of his ogre children followed him, sons and one of his daughters, with flowers sprouting from her head. Jordan seemed a little shaken seeing the King again. Anne held his arm.

“Fear not, all who are here, for I reign supreme.” Said the Summer Queen. “Come forward King Alberich and make haste with your business. You disturb our gentle company.” He bowed ever so slightly. The lords and ladies of summer glared at him.

“Come for my crown, have you?”

"I have come to pay my respects, Queen of Summer."

"I believe we have something of yours."

"Oh?"

"Bring him!" Commanded the Queen. Stinkthief, who was bound and gagged was dragged out from beneath a crypt under the great feasting table and handed to one of the King's sons.

"I recognize him!" Whispered Jordan.

"Me too." Said Anne. It was the ogre they hid from while on their way to the Land of the Baobabs. The angry one. The hobgoblin was bound tightly in thorny vines that cinched him even tighter when he struggled.

"He belongs to you. He has stolen something from your alchemists." King Alberich and Queen Titian stared at each other for a long time in silence. What transpired between them no one knew but she finally broke the silence.

"He has failed you. Think not that your ill-conceived plans escaped my ears." He said nothing.

"Be gone from here and I thank you for your respects, such as they are." She said proudly. He bowed curtly and the ogress with the flowers in her head gave Stinkthief a hard slap on the head. Stinkthief gave a strangled cry of fear.

"I am shocked and appalled Stinkthief!" Said King Alberich. He turned his wild gaze once again upon Anne and Jordan. Jordan slunk behind Anne but she stood resolutely beside Antigone, who looked as stern and unafraid as she always did.

"Stinkthief shall make an adequate meal for you, my son." He said to the ogre. The ogre grunted in approval, stuffed Stinkthief in a bag and heaved it over his shoulder. The King smiled at the struggling figure in the sack, revealing sharp white teeth. It reminded Anne of their time in the fortress kitchen - a place she never wanted to see again. Except this time their places were somewhat switched. She did not feel happy for what was about to happen to the hobgoblin but she figured Stinkthief was reaping the consequences of what he'd sown. There was nothing to be done about that. At least she wouldn't have to hear his evil giggling anymore. The King and his children left the hall. He mounted his great steed and they made their way back to the fortress in the Dark Mountain.

As quickly as they had appeared, they were gone.

.....

"What does it all mean?" Anne asked Zi. They were sitting on the grass, under evening's winking stars. Zi sighed.

"The great fair folk have been at this since the dawn of time. It is a dance of sorts. Power continually shifts from one of them to the next one, the way seasons and the forces of nature shift. I am a fairy of summer and I am happy that she is now the undisputed power in the land. Others put their allegiance with other powers or remain independent."

"I'm glad she's back too. I feel safer now that she's here." She said.

"I see Jordan over there stuffing himself with berries and honey combs." She said. Mera was busy flitting and fussing around him.

"So Mera is his guide? Sort of like you are mine?"

"Yes. Though I would say that you and I are friends now. I was once a guide but I think you can manage, as you say. And I prefer the title, friend, rather than guide."

"But of course we're friends, Zi! Friends forever!" Said Anne. They listened to the singing and the music and gazed at the Queen's beauty, the very reflection of summer. The trees were lush and full, the flowers a riot of variety, in full bloom and fragrant and vibrant with color, mushrooms sprouted everywhere and the grass a verdant green. The memory of the ruined and blasted Knoll Hilly was barely a memory here at the Summer Queen's Great Hall. Birds sang, the breeze was cool under the violet and black-blue sky, the sun long since faded down. Anne hoped that Queen Faye would never darken the Great Hall ever again.

Aes had finally gone back home. Antigone waited for Anne before leaving.

“It was good to see you Anne. I hope the next time we meet will be under better circumstances. Though, I suppose nothing could be better than this.”

“I think with the Summer Queen here we'll see less bad mischief.”

“Perhaps. But then, that is why summer is so well loved and why she is known far and wide as Good Queen Titian.”

“I like the sound of that, Antigone.”

“As do I. Oh, I meant to tell you. Before all that goblin and brownie battling Aes saw Hunter and his pack while on one of his fly-about. They were in the deep west beyond the Dark Mountain. He has seen many wonderful things and perhaps when the winter comes again he will come back and tell you of their travels.”

“Oh! I hope so! I miss Hunter. And Dorga and the rest! But Hunter most of all.”

“Yes, well, I must be off. Even Gryps grow tired and this celebration will go on all night! Do you and your friends have a way home?” Anne nodded and reached up and gave her a hug. Antigone gave a proud and happy cry, winked at Anne, spread her wings and was off, soon a flying shadow against the pale sister moons.

Anne received the rest of her stolen things, even the old leather bag, ripped to shreds but mended again. It was time to go.

“Zi, we have to get home before it's too late!” The Summer Queen smiled at Zi's request to escort Anne and Jordan home.

“You must come back and visit often. You have seen the land of Faerie in many aspects but summer is best of all.”

And so it was. Everything was in its place and Anne liked that. She took her bag and stepped beyond the fairy ring. Though the sun had long set, its light took its time fading away, being the longest day of the year. Its rays sank gently in layers of coral, orange and violet. The Queen appointed a troupe from her retinue to escort them home. Zi and Mera led the way. The circle of flame was gone but the flaming stallions continued to circle the fairy ring around the hall, tossing their great heads and snorting smoke and flame. The troupe of fairy lords and ladies along with the children and Zi and Mera marched through the firefly lit forest. No creature harmed them or threatened them.

“Jordan, I saw one of your arrows become like fire.”

“I know! That was the first time that ever happened. I panicked and then I calmed myself and willed myself to make the target. My dad taught me how to use a bow and arrow a long time ago. Interesting that Prince Efosa gave me a bow and a quiver of arrows that never run out.”

“Well, thanks! You saved my life!”

The troupe sang and marched down a path that seemingly only the fairies could see. It seemed to Anne that it was the same path that Zi showed her that led to the green door, the very first time she had come to Other Land.

And so it was!

It was the green door, right through the little old shed.

“Wait, wait! I'll use *my* key this time.” Said Jordan. He proudly pulled out his bone key and showed it to Anne, put it in the lock and turned it three times. The lock clicked open.

“Zi, will you come and visit soon?”

“Why would you even have to ask? You'll see the ginger cat again. Depend on it.” He said.

“Or a purple dragonfly.” Said Mera. She spread and fluttered her delicate faceted wings.

“Until then, farewell fair children!” Said one of the fairy lords. And then all of them, including Zi and Mera, disappeared, just like that!

One could suppose that the way to the green door was not entirely shut after all. Perhaps it opens and shuts when the need arises, one would imagine.

.....

Anne's night was filled with wonderful dreams to drown out the battle memories that came before. In the morning she awoke early. She looked over at her ladybug clock. It was five o'clock. She got up and went to her bag. All of her special objects had been found. She laid the bag in her toy chest and gazed at the ring. The citrine jewel glinted faintly. She looked around her bedroom. Finally, everything really was just as it should be. Anne went back to bed and fell fast sleep again. What she didn't know was that a surprise awaited her. Later that morning she came downstairs, tired from the nights' adventures, to the scent of scrambled eggs, pancakes and bacon wafting through the house. Dad was sitting in his favorite

chair playing with his new tablet. Anne rubbed her eyes and leaned on his outstretched legs.

“Hey, little one. Your mother and I will be leaving this morning to do some shopping. You'll have to make sure to keep all the doors and windows shut to keep those pesky raccoons out.” He winked at her. Anne nodded and yawned.

“Oh, I don't think they'll be back again.” She finally said.

“Is that so?” He asked. Anne nodded and closed her eyes. Then her eyes flew open.

“Wait! You're leaving me by myself? I'm old enough to be by myself at home?” Dad chuckled.

“Not all by yourself. We have company.”

“Who?” She perked up.

“Guess.”

“Emma? Tanya?” Dad shook his head and grinned. Then she heard voices in the kitchen. Mama's voice and . . . could it be? Anne ran to the kitchen.

“Grandma!” She ran and jumped into grandma Barbara's arms. Grandma Barbara laughed her merry, musical laugh. She sounded quite similar to the Summer Queen.

“When did you come?”

“Oh, very early this morning my flight came in.”

“So you're all better?”

“I sure am.” Anne hugged grandma tightly. Mama was grinning from ear to ear.

“I'll set the table for breakfast. Anne, help grandma get the pancakes finished.”

“Ok mama.” When her mother left the kitchen grandma's eyes sparkled mischievously.

“I see you are wearing the ring I gave you, but it has changed.”

“Oh, well. . . “

“No need to explain. What an interesting looking stone. Golden as the sun on the first day of summer.”

“Someone gave it to me and had it set in the ring.”

“Keep it safe, always. It's value is worth more than what money can buy. But, I'm sure you already know that?” Anne wondered at this and thought that perhaps. . . perhaps not?

“Grandma?”

“Yes?”

“It came to me on an adventure I had. A fantastic one.”

“Anne! Ma! Hurry with the breakfast! We're hungry!” Called mama.

“We're coming!” Called grandma. “Fantastic adventures are always the best kind. I've gone to many places all over the world. Alright, let me see now,” Grandma turned to transfer the batch of pancakes to a serving platter heaping with pancakes.

”We'll need to get the food on the table but when mom and dad leave we'll have some adventures of our own and you'll have to tell me all about it!” She smiled conspiratorially. She poured the last of the batter into the pan and flipped them over when they began to bubble. She flipped the last of the pancakes onto the platter, turned off the stove and took up the platter. She handed Anne the butter dish.

“Life is no good without butter!” She winked. Anne beamed. Grandma Barbara's white hair was cropped very short but growing in from last time. She wore a brand new pair of jeweled, dangly earrings and a wide brilliantly blue silk scarf wrapped around her waist as blue as her eyes.

“Well grandma, you'd better get ready because I have a **LOT** of stuff to tell you!” Grandma Barbara laughed.

“Then that makes *two* of us! Now let's get breakfast on the table before your parents starve!”

As for fairy troubles and adventures, of course there were more – more than this story can tell – but for that first week of summer and for many days afterward, everything in the Greene household was tickety-boo.

THE END

Note from the author:

This is the end of book six and the end of the series.
There may be a short story in the works next year, centering
around one of the characters in the series. Other than that,
we've come to the end, my friends. Hope you enjoyed the ride.
I certainly did!

Thanks: I want to thank all those who have downloaded the books in this series and enjoyed reading them enough to post a review, a rating or leave a comment. Whether you got them for free or purchased them, it means a lot to me. Thanks so much!

Dedications:

this series was inspired by many of my favorite things; nature,
German, Irish, Scottish, Russian and Dahomey (Benin) folk tales and fairy tales.
It was inspired by my favorite author of all time, J.R.R. Tolkien
and most of all, by my wonderful niece, Olivia.

About The Author:

Victoria A. Jeffrey grew up in Portland Oregon, attended Portland Community College and studied graphic design. She is an author and an avid reader of science fiction and fantasy. She also enjoys reading historical fiction and non-fiction. She has written three collections of poetry, some short stories and a book of fairy tales and fables. She is the author of the *Secret Doorway Tales* children's fantasy series.

Discover other titles and information and news from the author at her website:

<http://epistlepublishing.com/>

or her blog:

<http://www.pencilword.blogspot.com>

you can find many of her titles at these sites:

Amazon, B&N, iTunes, Smashwords, Kobo, Sony ebookstore!

Check out the other books in the *Secret Doorway Tales* series:

[The Pumpkin Princess](#)
[The Winter Wolves](#)
[The Lady Moons](#)
[The Green Door](#)
[The Mountain King](#)