

THE GOBLIN CROWN

PROLOGUE

A Story from the Inside

“Sun and Fire,” the goblin swore as he shoved his way out from under a dead body. “What a bloody, terrible day.”

For the past few hours, the goblin, who went by the unlikely name of Hop, had considered lying beneath this particular corpse to be a wise, if uncomfortable, tactic. But the battle he’d been avoiding had finally ground to its fatal conclusion, and the victors were busying themselves with the traditional murdering of the wounded and looting of the dead. It was time for Hop to move on.

Hop surveyed the carnage. The goblin army was in flight, the Dark Lady’s command post upon Solace Ridge swarmed with their enemies, and Hop could see a suspiciously feminine head impaled on a pike where her banner once flew. So she was dead, most likely. This didn’t come as much of a surprise to Hop. He’d heard enough stories on his grandpa’s knee to know that anyone who went by a name like “The Dark Lady” or “The Emperor of Night” or “The Invincible Overlord” usually didn’t end up on top. Inevitably, some intrepid farm boy or brave orphan or innocent milkmaid would find the Sword of Fate or the Ring of Truth or the Milk Bucket of Happily-Ever-After or whatnot and then that was that.

As a lad, Hop had loved those stories. Now though, Hop had experienced a story from the inside. From the inside, stories were a lot uglier than from the outside. It was as if the storytellers were up in the clouds somewhere, looking down. From high up,

everything might look simple and tidy, but down here where Hop was, there was mud, there was blood, and most of all, there were corpses.

Corpses as far as the eyes could see.

That's what you got when you took two enemy armies and jammed them between a river and a ridgeline. Add a few dozen half-mad wizards lobbing around fire and ice and other assorted nastiness, and the end result wasn't a glorious battle. It was a slaughter. To the soldiers on both sides, human and goblin alike, it didn't particularly matter what happened up on the ridge between the fanatical, black-robed prophetess and the intrepid farmer's son (or innocent milkmaid, Hop had been too far away to tell for certain). Down in the valley, the armies fought, and soldiers died.

So Hop didn't care much who'd won or who'd lost. To him, watching the human victors parade the Dark Lady's severed head around the field was just one final bloody act in a bloody, muddy day. The only things Hop cared about at the moment were, in order: getting away from the corpse-strewn battlefield valley, patching up the arrow wound in his leg, stealing something to eat, and finding a safe place to sleep.

"*Bosh*, time to go." Hop tossed aside his helmet, shield, and spear. He didn't want the extra weight to slow him down.

Because there was one more thing that Hop knew from being *inside* a story. When you were inside a story, it didn't end once Righteous Young Hero destroyed the Evil Tyrant. Stories might have Happily-Ever-Afters, but life just had Afters. And in the wake of the Battle of Solace Ridge, the After was full of dead friends, lost limbs, bitterness, and anger.

Hop spied a cluster of human generals standing around the Righteous Young Hero. Generals reminded Hop of ravens. Throw a battle and sooner or later a general or three would show up to peck out the occasional eye and claim credit. Right now, the victorious generals were gazing down at the dead, seeing their soldiers and sons and brothers lying in the red mud. Even from a distance, Hop got the impression they weren't ready for this particular story to end just yet.

What they were ready for was revenge. And once that started, Hop planned on being in a land far, far away.

As far away as he could get.

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BILLY SMITH AND THE GOBLINS



ROBERT HEWITT WOLFE

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