

Chapter 4

GONNA NEED A LOT MORE ROCKS

About a ten day flight or three weeks walk from the rabbit's meadow there was a large ranch. The ranch was a lot like a ranch that you might know. The animals, too you might find familiar but would be unexpected, indeed out of place, on a ranch in your world. The animals were not cows, steers, horses, or any other of the four legged creatures common to ranches. The animals on this ranch actually had, depending on the species, between zero and sixteen legs. This ranch was of all things a caterpillar ranch! The caterpillars, some the size of pillows, some small dogs, others as big as alligators were on the ranch for different reasons. Some were there for their fine fur, others for their fine spun silk. Some had spines that were as sharp and as hard as needles and some of them had needles that were sharp and poison. The spines could be used for a variety of things, but most of the spines would be

used for arrows, spears, and fence pickets. And then some were raised on the ranch because, after metamorphosis, they would be big enough for a Tickle to ride.

Now just as unique as the insects populating this ranch, the ranch hands sometimes known as caterpillar herders, larvae loopers, or slug surfers¹ were aptly named 'Tickles.' Tickles are similar to sloths but much smaller and with a hundred times more energy. They have four arms, like sloths but do not spend their lives in trees although they are still extremely good climbers. Their necks are long, their heads are small and their eyes are large. They come in a variety of colors and most have fur somewhere on their bodies. On average most Tickles are about the size of a human hand only slightly larger than a fairy. Although they are as unique and varied as the fairies they are not nearly as popular in human mythology. They have never been featured in a Disney movie nor have they been the subject of any fairy tale, fable or children's book. No one really understands why this is, especially the Tickles themselves. Like Fairies, Tickles are products of human imagination, invention and a creative energies. You would know them as tickle bugs or tickle monsters (though they are not monsters at all unless you are susceptible to tickling fits that result in falling down stairs, choking on your waffles peeing in your pants). Some tickles think they are actually the first of all imaginary creatures to be born of human imagination and children laughter. They think it's every adults first instinct when looking at a baby to tickle the poor thing.

¹ 'Slug Surfer' is a term originally coined by Garden Gnomes referring to a Garden Gnome that does not tend to his or her garden and lets it become over run with snails, weeds or show major signs of absenteeism. Slug Surfer is now a popular idiom often used to refer to any extremely lazy creature.

Every time a human plays a tickle game with a child a Tickle comes into the world. Well, not your world but this world and it is hugely populated with them. Imagine what kind of games some other being has to play to populate your world with creatures like you!

Sir Gertrudemous Tickle known to some as 'Bareback Jack' but to most as '*Sir* Tickle' was the Head Honcho of the Tough Luck Ranch. When he was younger and not quite as careful as he was these days he was apt to get into some tricky situations. Once while riding a herd of spiny caterpillars back to the ranch the herd got spooked by a wild collard lizard! The herd stampeded! The stampede ran through a huge gnome village wrecking every garden and throwing the gnomes into a hysterical frenzy! Not far from the village the earth fell away into a perilous canyon and that happen to be exactly where the stampeding caterpillars were headed! Getrudemous Tickle jumped into action. He jumped from his mount and ran across the backs of every spiny caterpillar until he got to the lead caterpillar! When he reached the lead caterpillar he grabbed onto its long poisonous head spines, sat on the caterpillar and lead the entire herd away from the hundred foot cliff! He rode that caterpillar all the way back to the ranch without a saddle. It was crazy, he even admitted himself, to ride a poisonous caterpillar that far without a saddle. What he did not admit was that his rear end was sore for weeks after. From that day forward everyone called him Bareback Jack. A few Tickles even wrote songs about the stampede and Bareback Jacks brave actions that day. For some reason though gnomes never sung those songs.

On this particular day, Sir Tickle was riding the fence line looking for breaks in the fence where something might get in or a caterpillar might get out. He was on his favorite caterpillar Avalanche. Avalanche was a huge winter caterpillar that Sir Tickle had found way off of his wintery mountain during an unusually warm winter. Not usually fond of warmer climates, winter caterpillars usually stayed up in the winter mountains and were notoriously hard to tame as well as extremely territorial. Sir Tickle had twice tried to take Avalanche back to his mountains and both times he had found the giant caterpillar waiting outside his front door the next morning. Now they were inseparable and really quite a stunning pair.

The day was beautiful, pleasant and clear with not a cloud in the great blue sky. It was also awfully strange. There was a kind of electricity in the air that Sir Tickle could feel. It was the kind of electricity that made your hair stand on end and made him keep looking over his shoulder for something that was never there. It was annoying. His gut told him to ride back to the ranch. So, being Bareback Jack, he rode out away from the fence line, away from the ranch.

Avalanche could feel it too. The caterpillars long blue spines, usually hidden beneath his wintery fur stood out, just visible enough to let anything know he was dangerous.

“I dunno Avalanche,” Sir Tickle said as they rode cautiously through the high brush. “Feels like a big storm is coming. Wish I could see one. It’d sure make me feel better if I could.” The caterpillar shot a pulse through his segmented body in

agreement. They stopped by a large Koby tree where Avalanche began to graze on the fallen leaves. He chomped one leaf down in three large bites and began on another when a frightened moan came from underneath.

“Whoa there, bud,” Sir Tickle jumped down and pulled the leaf off of the moaning thing. “What do we have here?”

A hawk laid on the ground curled up with two broken wings and countless other wounds all over his mangled body. He was barely breathing.

“Hawk?” Sir Tickle reached out afraid to touch the wounded creature but wanting to help it, “Hawk, what happened to you? Who did this?”

“Crows,” the hawk whispered in a pained voice, “they, they’re trying to keep it bottled up.”

“Crows? You’re talking crazy, Hawk,” Sir Tickle said as he examined the hawk closely, looking closely at the many wounds covering its body. This hawk wasn’t long for this world if he didn’t get help soon!

“The message,” the hawk coughed out, “they’re trying to keep it bottled up.”

Sir Tickle gave the Hawk a puzzled look. “Why would a crow do that? Crows do not attack hawks!”

“Come closer, tickle,” the hawk strained to speak. Sir Tickle got up close to the hawk’s beak. “You must tell the fairies. Tell

everyone.” The hawk drew in a deep shuttering breath and his eyes began to roll back in his head.

“Tell everyone what, Hawk?” Sir Tickle, suddenly alarmed, asked the hawk desperately.

The hawk opened one eye and said, “Goblins. They have a king. They chose a king.” The hawk’s beak barely opened as he spoke his one last word, “Obekey.” The hawk let out a long breath and his eyes closed. He didn’t move after that.

Sir Tiny grabbed a spine on Avalanche’s side and swung himself onto the big caterpillar’s back. “Let’s go, Avalanche! Get a move on you giant worm!” Sir Tickle, eyes wide with the shock of the hawk’s message, didn’t have to hurry the caterpillar much. The long insect turned himself up and around and headed toward the ranch at full speed!

The Goblins have a King! The words echoed a terrible echo in his head. The odds of the Goblins conjuring a king were usually slim but Obekey? Obekey had been here before. Some had been good and helpful, others visitors and some had been destructive but an *Obekey Goblin King*? Bad feelings amplified! Avalanche was heading toward the fence line going the long way.

“No time for fences today,” he yelled to his giant steed. He pulled on the reins. Avalanche reared up on his back legs and fell crashed through the fence. Pieces of fence flew everywhere! The caterpillar’s feet dug into the dirt as he launched himself into a gallop faster than he had ever galloped before! If anyone had seen Avalanche and Sir Tickle moving across the ranch land that

day they would have not believed a tickle on a caterpillar could move that fast!

The electric air and the strange feeling he had been feeling made sense to him now. There was a storm coming. A storm was coming and it was the worst kind he could have imagined. Even worse, he didn't know how far or how close it was. The dread he felt was heavy ice running through his veins. "C'mon big A! We got a lot of ground to cover," he said.

Then a shadow passed over his head.

The crow came down at him like a dagger falling through the sky! Instinctively he dropped over the side of Avalanche gripping the reigns. The crow sliced through the air, its claws missing the top of his head by hairs! Sir Tickle swung himself back up, unholstering his slingshot and drawing a smooth stone from his pouch! He cradled the stone in the sling while he searched the sky!

The crow flew up and turned a slow circle. The tickle was out in the open and an easy target on his fat caterpillar. Too easy, thought the crow. He smiled to himself, folded back his wings and fell through his attack cry. His prey, only seconds from his talons, turned its body to look up at him! All the better, thought the crow!

Sir Tickle, mostly his younger Bareback Jack self now, felt the stone missile in the cradle of the sling. He drew it back as far as the muscles in his arm would allow. The crow was falling faster than an arrow! Its talons glinted in the sunlight. Bareback Jack

took a deep breath. He let the cradle go. The stone missile fired through the air at ten times the speed of the crow.

The crow and the stone met quick, brief, lethal. Bareback Jack watched as the crow and the stone collided. The crow kept falling. But it did not fall gracefully and when it hit the ground it did not move again.

Bareback Jack shook his head, bewildered and in shock. The storm wasn't *coming*. It was here! Now every second truly counted! He spurred Avalanche on but instead of going faster the caterpillar stopped so abruptly that he almost flew off its back!

"What in the fires of Foundation are you stoppin'," Bareback Jack did not finish his question. Avalanche raised his blue spines to their full height. In front of them a massive tree loomed. The tree was thousands of years old and had probably been long dead for hundreds. It hadn't had a leaf on its branches in living memory. It did today. But today its leaves were black and moving without wind.

Crows. A murderous murder of crows covered every branch of the old dead tree.

Bareback Jack stood on the caterpillars back, slingshot hanging from his wrist. He whistled at the site and wiped the sweat from his brow. "Gonna need a lot more rocks," he said to no-one in particular.