

Chapter 5

NO HARD FEELINGS

THE Mountain goat was high up on the mountain when the tickling in the back of his brain became too much for him to bear. The darn bug music was still rolling around in his head and, no matter what he did to distract himself, the song was still there. He sat down on a step near the top of the mountain and chewed on an old branch while he let his mind puzzle over the beetle singing about nothing. Or was the beetle singing about *something*? Beetles just don't sing when they're happy. They don't sing when they are happy. They don't sing when they're in love. They don't sing their children to sleep. The only time they ever sing is when they are about to eat and they only eat the dead. But there was nothing for the beetle to eat anywhere around his mountain. So, there was no reason for the beetle to be singing and yet it had been! It was completely unnerving.

The goat stared down from the mountain. He was too high now, above the clouds. He imagined he could still hear the beetle singing. Oh, it was really getting to him now! He crunched as loud as he could on the old branch trying to make enough noise to drive the beetle song out of his head. When that didn't work he started to sing a song his mother use to sing to him but he couldn't remember if it was 'Bahaaa, bah, bah, bah or bah, bah, bah, bahaa.' He stomped up the mountain higher and higher making as much noise as he could on his way up. He came to a nice ledge at the very top of the mountain where he had plenty of room (room for a mountain goat anyway) to consider things. Looking around for something that might take his mind off the beetle song that had leeches its way into his brain he spotted the perfect thing. A large boulder sitting in the V of two smaller mountain might be just the thing to knock that silly song out of his head. He sized up the boulder and gave it taunting billy goat grunt, stomped one hoof into the dirt three times and charge the rock at full speed.

Although the boulder had been there for nearly two million years, wind, rain, snow and sun had eroded enough rock from beneath the boulder to leave it precariously perched on the mountain face. The goat hit the boulder head on at full steam and knocked himself completely silly.

"Oh my aching horns," the goat said to himself. He raised his eyes up and looked to see if he had, at least, cracked the giant rock.

He must have hit his head harder than he thought. The boulder was either no longer there or he had completely smashed it into dust. He shook his head, rubbed his eyes and stood up. His balance was ever so slightly off and he thought he ought to stay still until his head was completely clear again but the mystery of the vanished boulder was too great an attraction. He was not dreaming. It was gone. He looked over the edge where the boulder had been but saw only the tops of clouds. He perked his ears and heard nothing but the wind.

He sniffed around the ledge and puzzled over the mystery of the boulder for a few minutes longer. He must have knocked it completely off of the mountain! My body is strong and my horns solid, he thought to himself, but knocking a boulder off a mountain? That was a first for him! Today was turning into a very odd day. I am a powerful goat indeed! He couldn't wait to tell his friends what he had done. He looked through the crevice the missing boulder had exposed and down the other side of the mountain to where, again, he only saw the tops of the clouds. Again, he heard nothing. No rocks crashed down, no boulder tumbled. "How completely odd," he said and started down the other side of the mountain humming a familiar song that he wasn't quite sure where he had heard before.

He searched for the boulder. The other side of the mountain proved to be much easier climbing. He bounded back and forth looking for the boulder or signs of it crashing down the mountain but found nothing. He was still above the clouds and knew that boulder probably laid at the base of the mountain and had probably caused a bit of a ruckus had it gotten that far.

He stared up into the sky and, even during the day the red winter moon was completely visible. Below him a blanket of clouds whispered and wormed and flowed around the mountain. Below the clouds, he knew, the Goblin hordes gathered to call out a king. Perhaps the boulder had found its way to a large Goblin camp and crushed a hundred or two goblins. Oh boy, the other billies would not believe it! If Mountain goats had kings a feat like crushing Goblins with a stone hurled from his horns would certainly be worthy of a crown. He would certainly be a popular goat.

As he passed through the clouds and came down on the narrow crags and ledges of the mountainside he noticed something strange about the Goblin camps below him. Usually the goblin camps were alive with the noise. Goblin were raucous and the loud. Usually sounds of the Goblins fighting each other, screaming unintelligibly, banging the giant Ushped drums chanting the king chant and the continuous mindless raucous would have filled the air for miles. But today, today something was really, really strange. The camps were quiet. The goat was too high yet to see why but quiet Goblin camps were as odd as boulder bashing goats. He pushed himself further down the mountain and as he looked up toward the horizon he witnessed yet another strange sight. A green fire lit the low clouds on a distant edge of Whisper Canyon.

Even he knew what that meant. He knew Goblin Fire was reserved for one thing and one thing only. The Goblins had a King. The goat stood still and attempted to asses his situation. As he thought through the course of his day he came to another

revelation. The beetle, it had been celebrating it said. Now the goat knew why. His hair stood up on his back. His spine came alive with an electric tingle. The goat's heart beat harder and his eyes grew wider as he began to realize the enormity of what was happening here. He took two careful steps back as he now realized that he, too, was in terrible danger. He had to tell someone. No, the beetle was already doing that inadvertently no doubt but still spreading the news. His brothers and sisters on the mountain would not know yet. He could tell them. But the birds had probably done that as well. As far as he knew, in the two days it took for him to get over the mountain, the world may already know. In which case he should stay on the mountain, out of harm's way and wait for the armies of the Free folk to arrive. Which he knew they eventually would. No telling how long it would take though and they wouldn't know what they were walking into. Best the goat make himself useful and act for the good of all! He would have to be brave.

"Well, you did knock a boulder off a mountain," the goat said aloud, "and you are a strong, brave, smart and witty goat at times!" He glanced up the mountain and into the dissipating clouds. "Didn't seem so far away a few minutes ago," he said.

The goat began to think like he thought a brave goat would. His thoughts went something like this: *No ordinary mountain goat would approach a goblin encampment of any size nonetheless a camp of over two or three thousand. No goat, not even the most courageous or strongest would even consider risking his life in such a reckless manner! No, only the Boulder King would dare such an insurmountable task! Was he afraid of becoming a roast goat, goblin party favor? No! No, he*

was not! Well, maybe a little. Was he the baddest billie this side of the mountain! Well, yes, yes he was! Was he the only billie this side of the mountain? More than likely! Why should he be afraid? The boulder couldn't fight him. A Goblin wouldn't stand a chance! Of course, there were a lot of Goblins. And Goblins don't stand still waiting for a mountain goat to ram them. They also carry war hammers, axes and swords. Part of me is starting to think that I might have hit my head harder than I realized. And so on and so forth he continued thinking as he came to the edge of the Goblin camp where their firelight met the darkness, and he paused at the precipice thinking of his dear mother who nursed him for a whole month and taught him the one song he could still not remember. Pause. Then, why am I thinking in third person narrative?

He stayed at the edge of the dark, hiding behind rocks covered with a tasty looking thicket that had somehow survived the Goblin's camp fires thus far. He eyed the Goblins carefully. They were a mean bunch here at this camp. One among the several closest to him was clearly the leader, a Goblin captain. Massive horns erupted from everywhere on his armor. Atop his helmet the goat saw, to his discouragement several large pairs of mountain goat horns. *Perhaps I should have thought this all the way through.* His matted hair hung from inside his helmet shadowing the enormous and surely hideous face beneath it. Several Goblins came and put their hands on his shoulders as if they were consoling him but were chastely roared at and quickly made hasty exits. Others were packing, tying up tents tossing large saddle bags over their wicked looking slug mules.

The head Goblin rose from the stump, which had not long ago been a good sized tree, and clung to a red cloak in his hand, He considered the cloak for a moment, looked at the fire and, as he was about to toss it in, stopped. Again he stared at it. He held it out between his arms for a moment and then let out a terrible roar.

The camp stilled. The big Goblin looked around him and yelled, "What! Get back to it. A king waits!" Then he crumpled the big cloak in his hands and tossed it over his shoulder.

The goat watched the cloak unfurl in the air and come down only feet away from him. He couldn't have planned it any better! A goblin cloak! A perfect disguise! He would disappear like a ninja goat into the Goblin hoard and walk among them! The wolf among sheep! First a boulder basher! Now an intrepid spy! *My legend grows!*

The goat stilled himself and took a deep calming breath. 'Now or never,' he thought as he slipped out of the darkness, ducking his head low with his horns to the ground. He tucked his horns under the cloak. With a quick toss of his head the cloak came up off of the ground, spread out in the air above him and fell like a heavy cloud over him.

The goat held his breath. He listened to the camp and waited for the cry that would end the legend of the boulder bashing goat. It did not come. He was just an old goblin cloak wandering around a Goblin camp like any old goblin cloak would on any given goblin night.

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As the boulder is knocked off of the mountain and floating through the ether of my imagination I kept thinking, 'what am I going to do with this boulder. I can do anything with it. I can have it plummet through an unexplainable portal and have it smash some insurance company lawyer while he's giving a car accident victim the third degree—or it can crash down on Yusef, giving this story a surprise lackluster ending. I can do anything with it.' I have never been able to levitate a boulder in my life before. But now I am levitating one through an entire chapter! I may even keep the boulder suspended in my imagination and use it somehow later in some other chapter. I am the magic stone floater! Nope, that sounds like an allusion to a third floating in a toilet. I am the magic hack writer, giant boulder levitator! No one will believe how much disbelief I can suspend!

I am a goblin cloak, I am a goblin cloak, I am a goblin cloak. The goat moved as quietly, head hung low, eyes forward, the cloak a curtain hangin from his horns. He could barely see anything. The cloak draping over his horns allowed him only the narrowest views. He would have to move closer into the camp where it was crowded. There he could get between the shuffling Goblins and, if his luck held out, make his way into a marching column where he knew the Goblins noticed nothing but the back of each others heads.

I am a goblin cloak, I am a goblin cloak, I am a goblin cloak. He scampered from the shadow of a tent. Quickly he made his way behind a foul smelling stack of barrels full of goblin grog. From there he could see a goblin slug that would offer him plenty of protection from any suspicious Goblin eyes. Then another brilliant idea came to the goat. 'Yes, oh yes that could work,' he thought. The slug was covered with baskets and saddles and other detritus like goblin bramble. There was still enough room 1 on its back for a mountain goat pretending to be a goblin cloak. He could conceal himself easily there. This could work. He tippy toed five feet. This will work! Another five feet. This has to work! 'Oh I am a genius,' he thought!

Then the camp noise stopped. Nothing moved. It seemed to the goat as if the very air had held its collective breath if that were even possible. Then a voice as heavy as a stone crushed all hope.

"Behold," a Goblin voice smashed like pinball thunder through the quiet, "the bloodied cloak!"

The goat knew it was over. His terrified feet were stuck. Paralysis was something the goat thought he would never know but yet here he was paralyzed beneath an old, bloody goblin cloak.

"It's not possible," a Goblin said.

"The King's fire is already lit," said another.

"Some kind of trick?" This voice from behind him said.

"Has to be a trick!"

"Kill it!"

"HOLD," the thunderous voice the goat recognized as the Goblin captain's voice commanded. "GIVE US A RULE," the voice boomed again and the goat felt himself physically shrink.

"You had better be a king in there," the captain's voice said, now right down close to the goat's ears. "If you are anything but a king they will eat you and make you watch," his voice becoming a whisper, "so, if you know what's good for you when I pull this cloak off you had better make a rule!"

The goat felt the cloak sink up into the Goblins huge fist. Soon he would be watching his beautiful strong hind legs being salted over a goblin fire. His face started to tingle and tiny pains flickered like cactus needles pricking him all over his body. He had never been dizzy before but he was sure that he was about to be. Quite unexpectedly, as he felt the blanket rising, his mother's song came back to him. *Buh buh buh/bah bah bah bah/bah bah bah bah*

– *baaah buuuuh!* Of all things, now? This is what he would remember before he was gobbled by Goblins? Oh, he felt the tingling going away. The blanket was halfway off of him still moving but in slow motion. Someone had slowed time down. He remembers then, his mothers face looking down on him while she nuzzled him toward a tiny ledge high up on a mountain. “Jude,” she said his name. Oh he remembered everything now. He remembered the soft meadow grass and his mother’s very grey eyes watching him climb his first slope.

He remembered how she had stood below him on the mountain the first few times he climbed on his own. How she followed below him to break his fall. He remembered also the way she made herself big and stood over him while the mountain lion circled. The way she took on the big cat without giving any thought as to how she would survive its huge claws and sharp white teeth. How was it that his mother had been so brave?

He felt the blanket come completely off of him now. “Go now, Jude!” Mothers words were harsh but kind, “I’m going to be some other kids mother soon! Go! You can take care of yourself now!”

“It’s not a trick! It’s a goat!”

“It’s not a goat,” a goblin called out fro the crowd, “it’s a joke!”

Jude had never heard a Goblin laugh before. Not many had. It wasn’t that Goblins never laughed it was that they *almost* never laughed. Goblins took their humor very, very, seriously which is

why they almost never laughed. But they did make jokes. In eighteen thousand years of goblin memory they had made exactly seven jokes that were still considered funny. Sure they made other jokes but they were all just variations of the original seven and would never be considered anything better than that.

The Goblins had more chance of conjuring a new King, of which there was usually very little, than they had of inventing a new joke. In fact, most believe the original seven jokes came from the same Goblin. Some think that the comedian Goblin may not have been a Goblin at all. After all, eighteen thousand years is a long time to go without at least one Goblin making at least one new joke.

But tonight the Goblins laughed. Some doubled over in pain from laughing so hard. A few collapsed to the ground pounding their fists into the dirt and tears rolled out of their eyes. Jude watched. He knew he could and should run now but something was stopping him. His eyes fell over the crowd of hysterical Goblins and he too laughed a little. Then he looked up at the captain who was not laughing at all. The captain's eyes were smiling though. This Goblin was smart Jude could tell. This Goblin had, if any goblin could ever make a claim to having this one could, charisma.

"You had better make your rule," the Goblin captain said in a whisper only to Jude.

The Goblins began to make jokes (not original by any means just jokes based on the original seven which were good enough for the moment at hand).

“Let’s eat us a king goat,” one said as he raised himself from the ground still holding his belly from laughing pains.

“Iv’e never had joke goat before!”

“Wait,” another said, “what if he tastes funny too?”

“I’ll have his funny bone!”

“Look at him! A goat that funny has to have more than one!”

Jude watched them as they made one another fall out into more fits of laughter. He shook his head. Today had been an odd day indeed: first the beetle, then the boulder and now this. How he wished he would be able to tell this story to his friends. The only one telling his story now would be the Goblins who, sadly were notoriously bad story tellers. Not only would it be a bad story, it would be a bad joke and he would be the butt of it.

It was all too soon that three Goblins pulled themselves out of their laughing fits and decided something in them more primordial needed satisfying. Still smiling one pulled out a large hatchet and smiled at Jude.

“C’mon and get some goat jokey,” he said and caused another wave a laughter to ripple across the horde.

'Wow,' Jude thought, 'a witty Goblin.'

The three Goblins approached him. The witty one tested his thumb on the hatchet. The other two pulled knives from somewhere beneath their confusing armor. All three drooled.

"Maybe," the Goblin captain said with a light hearted tone, "we should, before we eat it, ask it for a rule?"

That remark caused another huge wave of laughter to barrel its way through the Goblins. A lot of the Goblins went back into laughing fits. Not the three coming to carve him up though, Jude noticed. Their eyes were fixated on him now. Like the mountain lions that came for him when he was just a babe they saw him, not as a goat, but as a full belly and a nap.

You have to take care of yourself now Jude.

"Goblins do not eat goats," Jude declared and stomped a foot into the dirt.

"Did you hear that boys?" The hatchet Goblin said to his two accomplices. "We don't eat goats!" The other two snickered. The laughter died away and the other Goblins looked on. The idea of the goat making a rule stirred some thoughts. Could a goat be a king? Jude saw the question on some faces. On most faces he saw only the lust for his meat.

"Goblins DO NOT eat goats," he screamed a billy goat scream and put his horns forward. "I'm warning you!"

"What's your name, goat?" Asked hatchet Goblin.

Jude put his head farther down in defiance and yelled, "I am Boulder Smasher! And I am going to smash you three!"

The hatchet Goblin smiled, drool dripping off his tusk like teeth.

Then a loud boom shook the mountain. The hatchet Goblin stopped smiling. Another loud boom, closer this time, ceased all laughter.

The captain looked at the goat named Jude, his charismatic face becoming a question mark.

The hatchet Goblin took a step back. Jude felt the air around him change.

BOOM! BOOM!

A horrible grinding, screaming scraping sound echoed from everywhere. The Goblins looked in apprehension all around them and at Jude. They were mistaken? How can a goat be king? What bad magic was happening here?

The three Goblins that had been so hungry for him took another step back and, as they did, all three looked up to see the rising sun blotted out by a huge shadow.

Jude had indeed knocked a boulder off the top of the mountain. It had not fallen far when it got caught up on an old dead tree. The tree had held the weight of the boulder but only just. The vulture that noticed the Goblins beginning to pack up their camp also noticed the perfect place to watch and wait for the

Goblins to leave. Goblins always left something for the vultures to pick over. The vulture circled the boulder resting on the dead tree for a time before he decided to perch there. His talons came down and he landed gently on the boulder.

It was more weight than the dead tree could bear. The long dead roots tore from the mountain and the boulder sailed off of the tree clearing hundreds of feet before striking the side of the mountain and bouncing another thousand feet. Again it hit the mountain and again it sailed through the air gaining more momentum. As its velocity increased the path of the giant boulder falling through the air brought it rocketing toward the curving and upward facing slopes of Moonclimb Mountain. It hit again and shot down the loose rocks nearing the base of the mountain where nature and time had turned that particular part of the mountain into a perfect launching ramp.

The boulder screamed and scraped down the ramp and then shot up off of into the air one last time.

The three hungry Goblins were flattened with a loud earth shattering kaboom. Dust and wind blew out from beneath the boulder as it cratered into the earth. Loose rocks from the mountain clattered down in tapering applause.

All was quiet when the dust cleared. The Goblins stood wide eyed looking at Jude.

“GOBLINS DON’T EAT GOATS,” one screamed as he fell prostrating himself in front of Jude! Then all the Goblins fell to their knees and began chanting, “Goblins don’t eat goats!” The

captain fell on one knee in front of Jude the Boulder Smashing Goat, "I don't know how you did that but if you want to survive longer than a day you will follow me into that tent," he pointed to a large round, red tent, "over there. Now."

Jude did as he was told. Following the captain over to the tent they passed by the boulder. Jude looked down into the large impression where he could just make out a goblin hand holding onto a hatchet.

"Sorry fellas," he said looking down into the hole, "no hard feelings."