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GOBLINS, GADGETS, & GOURDS  
A GOBLIN’S MISADVENTURES

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# GOBLINS, GADGETS, & GOURDS

## A GOBLIN’S MISADVENTURES

SAMPLE EXCERPT

*A.J. Crow*

## CHAPTER ONE

“Hang in there, Lola,” I told my donkey, adjusting her bridle for comfort. She’d traveled with me through two realms so far and the old girl was still kicking... for the most part. The arthritis flare-ups would slow us down at times, and I was running low on her supplements, but the donkey was indomitable. Seriously, some days she could outwalk even me.

Lola recognized her name, turning her head up to look at me with those milky, dark eyes and belt out a series of brays. The once shrill cry was weaker these days, softer. The donkey was ancient. But she was all I could afford after escaping my goblin clan. I’d stockpiled as much coin as I could for years leading up to that monumental day. But it didn’t go very far between purchasing her and a rickety cart I had to reinforce with spare boards and nails. It was only slightly unbalanced, built on a simple frame with a harness. Conveniently, it had a roof, and in the shelter, some clothes, dried figs and apples, and jerky for the road. There was also Lola’s beloved barley straw.

And of course the portable nightlight I invented. Purchasing three large crates full ate up most of my savings. But each contained seventy-five professionally manufactured lights based on my extensively tested prototype. A year ago when I’d started selling it, I was a man with hope. These days, I wanted to cringe every time I tried out my sales pitch on a new customer.

Either my presentation sucked, or the nightlight did. It was sort of pretty. I thought so anyway. Goblins had little experience with aesthetics. But... shit, it worked.

Lola’s head swayed side to side like a hammock, the bony joints of her hips pinning up the donkey’s sagging skin. Her bark-colored fur was gray in patches across her frame with stray white hairs just about everywhere. More seemed to sprout up each day. I wasn’t sure how long she would last. Sometimes watching her pull the cart with her weary bones made me feel like an asshole for forcing her to do it. But I don’t know. Something about her... She wasn’t a quitter. Lola was special. As was our bond. She worked as hard for me as I did for her.

I tightened the belly band which tended to go slack from wear and jogged ahead to lead the donkey, giving her head a good scratch. She appreciated that, raising her chin to let the sharp tips of my claws reach for a deeper scratch. Ahead, the swelling hill sloped downward. For miles, there had been nothing but the dirt road winding like unraveled twine, broad enough to fit three wagons side by side, though we hadn’t seen anyone in days. Everything was dead out here, the earth a pale

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gold and threaded with hairline cracks and disintegrating roots crumbling under the raging heat. There was a sickening dryness from the overbearing sunlight, this coming from a guy who grew up in dank, dark caves. Scavenging for precious ores with my clanmates didn't make me sweat this much. I slipped off my blue vest and tossed it in the cart, then peeled my sticky shirt away from my skin. The tawny cotton was soaked in my sweat, smelly and in desperate need of a wash.

Lola lagged as the hill hit a slight incline, her sides heaving, breaths coming out harder. It was a huge load she was carrying.

“I gotcha, girl.” I ran behind the cart and pushed, clicking my tongue so she kept moving. It was heavy mainly because of all the nightlights. And I wasn't the breed of goblin that plowed down drawbridges. Most Scavengers had builds like mine, not meaty and muscly, but leaning more toward skinny and scrawny. Or in my case, an I-prefer-books-to-battle body. Still, if Lola would fight to make it to the top, I would get her there. The donkey brayed crossly because she was tired of this shit.

“I know,” I called. “I know.”

We reached the peak of the hill, lines of sweat running down from my mohawk like someone had cracked open a coconut on my head. I rejoined Lola and held my hand over my eyes like a visor, immediately spotting my destination: Flamedance City at long last. A city so far from any other realms that the nearest place of interest was a wasteland farther north. But we wouldn't reach Flamedance today. It was nearing dark, almost time to make camp.

I spotted a few coyotes the night before, which made Lola absolutely miserable. They wouldn't try to come near us of course, sensing my innate predatory nature. By goblin standards, I was far more dangerous than a coyote. With sharp, pointed teeth, claws, and innate monster strength, I was a thing of nightmares.

Okay, not *me*. Others of my kind maybe. I was one hundred percent goblin, just take away... everything that makes a goblin a goblin.

But the coyotes didn't know that.

I yanked my shirt up to wipe my hot face. Lola snorted, braying again, and sped up.

“No, Lola, there aren't any coyotes out. I'd be able to smell them before—”

Then I saw it. The reason for her burst of energy.

Not far ahead was a sprawling pumpkin patch.

No. Not a patch. A *field*.

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It went on and on, unfolding across the land, thriving and lush. How did it manage to grow out here in these conditions? The ground was about as healthy as stale, crusty bread. And there were no water sources that I could see, not even a well. Nor were there any farmhouses.

The field was apparently self-sufficient.

“To hell with it,” I told Lola. “Tonight we’re having baked pumpkin and pumpkin soup, topped with pumpkin sauce, roasted pumpkin seeds, pumpkin slivers, all adorned with pumpkin leaves and stem. How’s that sound?”

Lola stared blankly at me. I rolled my eyes.

I actually hated pumpkins. Never could stand the smell. But tonight, a dinner of them sounded completely acceptable to my empty, groaning stomach.

As we approached the field of fiery orange, oaky white, and sunflower yellow pumpkins, gourds, and squash, I did a thorough scan for any signs designating this as private property. There were none. Lola immediately began grazing on the fragrant green grass. I removed the bridle and harness from her, lowering the shaft of the wobbly cart to the ground.

The donkey was happy to be free and as I said, “Don’t stray far,” as if she understood, Lola stopped in her tracks and commenced a lengthy period of feasting. No pumpkin was safe from the grandma donkey’s voracious appetite. Same could be said for me.

As I picked a few from the field, a figure about half a mile away halted me dead in my tracks. I clutched the produce to my chest. The night was cooling now with the sky painted in rich, liquid blues, dark enough that I could really only distinguish the farmer’s silhouette. I waited to see if he’d shout at me.

He didn’t. Just stood there.

Seconds passed. I squinted to try and make out what he was doing with his arms held out at his sides like that. The guy didn’t speak. Nor did he move. It was impossible for him *not* to see me. The lanterns on my cart burned with a powerful flame inside, giving away my location. Not hard to do this far out of the city planted in the middle of nowhere.

The farmer remained inert.

“Wait a second.” Son of a bitch. “That’s not a farmer, Lola. It’s a *scarecrow!*” Of course. Crowned on his head was a conical hat complete with straws of hay poking out, more of it spearing from his sleeves and waistband. I poked fun at myself, standing in the middle of nowhere waiting for some stuffed scarecrow to chase me off. That was simply ridicu...

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But then...

Why would a scarecrow be out here?

I dismissed the thought. Didn't matter. No one was here *now*. It could've been abandoned for all I knew. And we'd be gone by morning.

To Lola, I said, “I doubt they're gonna miss just a few pumpkins from at least ten thousand out here.”

But just to be safe, I left some pieces of copper by the field. Payment for a hearty meal. I took my uncooked feast back to my cart where Lola happily chewed through a ripe pumpkin the size of a watermelon.

Aided by my unrivaled novice culinary skills, I whipped up a more realistic rendition of the meal I imagined and ate it all up. The flavors were... nothing I was going to miss, but then how could anyone make a pumpkin taste good? After dinner, a small pang of pain, no more than a ghost of a headache, crackled in my right eye. I ignored it, laying out my bedroll beside my cart. Lola ambled over, finally sated from hunger, and sniffed my hair, taking a thick electric blue lock in her curious mouth.

“Knock it off,” I said, shooing her away. The old donkey brayed like she was laughing. I'd been hanging around her too long because I could spot the nuance in her sarcastic “you're an idiot” bray and her more typical “I need a break” bray. I crossed my legs at the ankle, resting my hands on my full stomach, and scrutinized over my cart. It needed a coat of fresh red paint. Just a few touches I'd make before entering Flamedance. Hey, first impressions counted.

I cringed at my embarrassing attempt at logo design where I'd written in dreadful penmanship *Knell's Stupendous Inventions*.

Stupendous.

Shit.

That word had always bothered me. Why did I choose it? Just looking at the word made my skin itch. It sounded like *stupid*. *Knell's Stupid Inventions*.

*Amazing* was boring. I should've used *Marvelous*. All wizards used *Marvelous*.

I growled in annoyance and looked away. My headache was worse, throbbing across my forehead now. The humidity didn't help it any. I never got headaches though. What the hell brought it on? Was it the goddamn pumpkins? Maybe I was allergic.

I tried to ignore it and shut my eyes, forgetting about the pain as I easily drifted off.

~

The morning light crept out from the horizon, washing over the valley and pumpkin field in its searing heat and infernal brightness. Sometimes I still missed my home in The Caves, where darkness was soothing and mellow. But not the clan. I didn't miss them at all, not even Derin and Vax. I'd been witness to enough bloodshed, innocent slaughtering, and purloining villages since I was a kid. Regular pummeling from other Scavengers didn't toughen me up as much as it broke me down.

So... yeah. Bring on the sunlight.

I'd recovered from the headache, but my skull felt like it weighed as much as a boatload of silver. Somewhere nearby came the wet crunching of Lola feasting in the pumpkin field. I groaned because sitting up felt impossible. My hand instinctively went to my head—and touched a texture other than my skin and hair. I felt for ears.

There were none.

Then for a nose.

Nothing.

But as I reached for my mouth, my fingers slipped inside this gaping crack in my head, feeling nothing but something slick and flat, with a slight bulge. I pulled one out.

A pumpkin seed?

As my hands explored my... *head*... panic rose from my gut. Holding my smooth, round, ginormous skull, my other hand planted firmly on the bedroll, I stood. Fuck if my head wasn't *insanely* heavy. I wobbled around, slamming into the side of the cart. I went around back and climbed in... or tried to.

“You're kidding me,” I said to myself, struggling to climb into the back of the cart. I mean, it wasn't asking too much of my body. The bed of the cart was only two or three feet off the ground. So *why* was this so difficult?

Throwing my weight into it, I gave myself a one, two, three—and toppled headfirst inside. My body rolled over my head in an awkward somersault, my legs slamming into the crates of nightlights. They clinked inside, rattling like rat teeth in a collector's tin.

“Ah shit,” I bellowed, supporting my bumpy head as I sat up uncomfortably. In my satchel was a flask, bone dry on the inside, but the glassy metal was reflective at least. I haphazardly

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shuffled my hand around inside the bag until I felt the familiar shape, square with beveled edges. Yanking it out with other contents flung across the cart bed, I held it up to my face.

Or what *should've* been my face.

Except today, I had a pumpkin for a head. A big carrot-colored, cauldron-sized pumpkin with a crudely carved face. And a warped stem.

When I gasped in terror, its face changed. *My face*. Gods almighty. *It was my face*.

“No.” Its lips moved. *My lips*. Or mouth rather. Because I had no lips. Just a kind of sharp, jagged cutout.

I recklessly climbed out of the cart and stared into the miles of wispy weeds, dappled grass, and produce. That was why no one was out here. Obviously, the place was hexed. Just my luck. I marveled at my own stupidity.

*Knell's Stupid Inventions.*

After a few minutes of calling myself every nasty swear I knew, Lola trotted up to me and gave my new head a curious sniff. The donkey brayed and snapped at it.

“No! Lola, it's me!”

She looked understandably confused, blinking and sniffing the rest of me. I scratched her favorite spot beneath her chin with my claws. After a second, she licked my palm, recognizing me.

“We gotta get to the city, Lola. I need a doctor.”

A witch doctor. Which were depressingly rare. No one used magic these days. But to reverse a hex, there was no other way.

I strapped Lola up and we got moving.

Walking with this... *pumpkin* for a head was strenuous. Not to mention infuriating. Now I felt Lola's plight because thirty minutes on our way, I was *exhausted*. My shoulders and neck cried out in agony, bearing the weight of a foreign object they were not naturally meant to support. Everything hurt.

The rest of the way to the city was full of leaning, tilting, stumbling, and swearing. I didn't take the time to admire the whimsical craftsmanship of the entrance gates, a city abundant in technological breakthroughs from cold boxes called refrigerators to clothing with what I believed were named zippers. No, I was too busy trying not to break my neck. While I did get many questioning looks and rude guffaws, no one was afraid of me. Or flinging food at my face. Which was the usual welcome I got whenever I entered... well, anywhere. People would see the green



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skin and dog-like ears and go, “Ugh. A goblin. Someone chase it back into the alley.” On bad days, words were replaced with screams of terror and the alley was actually a dungeon.

But hey, not today. I was still *green*, yeah, but I’d bet they figured some sorcerer with a sense of humor gave me a pumpkin for a head.

Or maybe they knew the abandoned field just a mile out of the city was hexed. Ah. That seemed more likely.

*Although... I may actually make some sales this way.*

Silver lining.

There was a stacked post of signs. Holding Lola’s bridle, I tugged her along and went to check for any visitor’s center. Skimming the names of roads, schools, and markets, there was a stamped symbol for *hospital* down a major roadway called Dentoa. The arrow pointed straight ahead, so I clicked my tongue to get Lola’s attention and we moved on.

A group of children giggled at me from the sidewalk, pointing at my head as we passed each other. Their mother hushed them, hiding a smile herself. I rolled my eyes—or would have if I had eyeballs.

“Better laughter than knife jabs, right, Lola?” Not even a bray. “Thanks for taking my side.”

Dentoa Road was swimming with extravagant carriages pulled by snow white horses, flocks of city folk, and heavy-duty wagons carrying barrels of rainbow-colored fruits and vegetables. They had me looking twice because how were they cultivating crops like that in a near-desert city? Flamedance had the luxury of electricity, but barely, with antiquated turbines that just weren’t as efficient as they had been decades ago. Back then, the strong winds sweeping off the now dried up Tanta Sea were caught by the spider-like propellers. These days, the turbines occasionally ran only an hour or two, so Flamedance was prone to frequent blackouts. It was not the kind of place I expected farmers to yield results.

*Like that mysteriously growing pumpkin field along the outskirts.*

The hospital was just around a broad curve in the road. In most realms, healing centers were the norm for injuries and other maladies. But these *hospitals* were far more sophisticated and advanced in their treatments and the knowledge of their physicians. They were quickly becoming the standard, though I had never been to one.

Until now.

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This place was five stories, built of elegant, polished stone slabs packed with maroon cement. The arched windows were framed with cloud-colored shutters, some closed for privacy. The universal symbol for healthcare, a heart with sparkles meant to imitate faerie dust, was embroidered on a massive tapestry just outside. I gave the hospital another quick look, nervous about entering being a goblin and all. With our dark reputation of kidnapping and murder, mostly against humans—which happened to be the majority in Flamedance—I always felt a little apprehensive about stuff like this. My guild weren’t killers though.

Okay, *some* were. But not me.

Derin and Vax? Eh. Not important anymore.

We were Scavengers. That was our job. Taking lives was not part of our duties. We’d crawl the battlefields *after* more bloodthirsty guilds like Brawlers and Eaters did their part. So, yeah, going into hospitals was unheard of for us, but as fate decided, today I was a pumpkin head.

Pouring some water from a jug into a tin bowl, I left Lola with the drink. After a pat on the rump, I wrangled my courage and went inside.

I didn’t get as many strange looks like I had on the road, probably because most visitors had more serious issues to deal with. But after a sharp look around, there weren’t any ailments worse than mine. At least not ones that were visible. The *nurses*, essentially assistants to doctors, were dressed in their traditional garb of a periwinkle long-shirt about the same color as my eyes, brown pants, and simple shoes more like slippers. I approached the nearest one, a girl no more than twenty or so, who took one look at my head and was stricken with horror.

“Oh,” she croaked. “Oh gods.”

“My reaction exactly when I woke up like this today,” I said, poking the head filled with stringy goop and pumpkin seeds.

“I-I see. Umm... I’ll assign Dr. Parinta to you straight away.” The girl beckoned me with a curl of her finger. As we walked down a long corridor, she asked, “You say you woke up this morning looking like... umm... *that*?”

“Yup.”

“Hmm.” The assistant stopped in front of a room sectioned off by paper partitions. She slid open the curtain, same color as her shirt, and gestured for me to enter. “Dr. Parinta will be right with you.” She smiled at my chest because it must’ve been too weird or hilarious, or both, to look me in the face.

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I sat on a wooden stool that creaked beneath the hefty mass on my shoulders. On the desk to my right were rows of bottles containing ointments, serums, rubs, and even a few potions only to be used by those qualified. I took a big breath, sighing it out, and waited. I read the names on the bottles. Cinamore oil used for warts and pimply breakouts, Lemonfisk rub used for colds, Thistlecube used for eye leakage. There were more, all of which I was familiar with, but none that could fix this.

*I really hope they have a cure.*

Minutes later, the purple curtain was pushed aside, and a tall woman thin as a fish bone walked in. She was more ancient than Lola, which was good because that meant she had experience. The older woman smiled with crinkled lips and said, “Hello—” her eyes trailed down to the nametag around my neck “—Knell?”

“Knellian, Knell. I go by either.” I smiled back.

“Knellian, then. I’m Dr. Parinta. So you’re here because of the pumpkin growing out of your neck.” Her expression remained solemn, not finding it funny.

“Correct.”

“All right. I’d like to examine it, if I could.”

I nodded.

Dr. Parinta stepped forward and gave the head a feel. “Open your mouth please.” The wafting stench of pumpkin came out when I did. The doctor hummed, continuing with her checkup. Soft eyes skimmed up and down my head, feeling, poking, tugging. Then they dropped to my hands. I tucked them between my thighs so my claws didn’t show.

“The nurse said you woke up with this head?” Dr. Parinta asked.

“Yeah. I was still me last night before I went to sleep.”

“Mmm.” The doctor crossed her arms, tapping a finger. “And what race are you normally?”

“Umm.” I swallowed hard. “Halfling.”

“No, I don’t think that’s true.”

I tried licking my lips but—oh yeah, I had no tongue. “Go-goblin.”

“As I thought.” Parinta didn’t dwell on my answer. “By chance, did you eat from the poisoned field to the southwest of the city, by Venture Path?”

“I... did.”

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Dr. Parinta didn't look hopeful. “Unfortunately, I can't help you with restoring your original head. That field is claimed by a demon who poisons the crops with dark magic. The sort of curses we have no remedies for.”

“Oh fuck. Uh, I mean crap.”

Dr. Parinta raised a hand. “Now there is someone who may be able to help you, or at the least offer a better suggestion on where to go from this point.”

I listened.

“Not far from here in the heart of the city, there's an agricultural trade group founded by a demigod whose expertise is, discernibly, in farming and all things related. While I've never known anyone who would, uh...”

“Be stupid enough to eat from an inexplicable pumpkin field out in the middle of nowhere?” I finished when she wouldn't. Come on. We were both thinking it.

“I wouldn't put it in those words exactly.”

I scoffed. “I would.” I held my head as I stood, slowly growing accustomed to it, a fact which aggravated me even further.

“Let me walk you outside. I'll direct you to her center.”