

~~METROGNOMES~~

WORSE THAN A GREMLIN



Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

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Metrognomes: Worse Than a Gremlin

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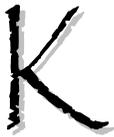
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Cover art by Molly Brimer.

A large, stylized, black letter 'K' with a white outline and a drop shadow, positioned at the start of the first line of text.

AZKAL NO'TALL AND HIS APPRENTICE

An'sep No'tall, his young cousin, walked through the darkened, underground tunnels of the gnome tribe Qadash in restful silence. Kazkal knew that it was only a matter of time before his youthful protégé broke the silence, so he enjoyed it while he could. Peaceful quiet was a precious thing to any seasoned warrior. The quiet of home, so

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different from the deadly quiet one encountered on the battlefield; the quiet that came before a gremlin ambush.

Things had been slow on the battlefield as of late, however, and Kazkal had been granted leave for a time. He had not seen the home he daily defended from gremlins for more than a few moments in a very long time. Longer than he could calculate. Torches lit the tunnels dimly as they entered the territory of Clan No'tall. Kazkal had always been proud of his clan, for it was one of the most honorable clans within the Qadash tribe. Clan No'tall was famous for producing many legendary gnome warriors, like Kazkal's late father Kinto, and his unhappily retired grandfather Meso. Kazkal knew that he was seen as the latest rising star of Clan No'tall, but he shrugged off fame. He was not impressed by it. An'sep, on the other hand, was in love with Kazkal's glory. He never let an opportunity pass by to put Kazkal on a pedestal.

“Kazkal?”

The silence was broken. “Yes, An'sep?”

“How long will we be on leave?” The young boy seemed troubled.

“Perhaps a week, perhaps a month.” Kazkal shrugged. “It all depends on the gremlins. It all depends on when General Argon calls us back.”

“Why do you suppose the gremlins have been so quiet?”

“I do not know. And I do not trust it. Frankly, I question the general’s judgment in allowing any warriors to take leave. This could be a gremlin trap.”

An’sep beamed. “Especially with *you* gone! There’s no way that our army can stand against the gremlins with you on leave!”

Kazkal was amused by An’sep’s high opinion. “Don’t be foolish, lad. The army stood long before I was a part of it, and will stand long after I am gone. You seem to forget that I have only been a warrior in full for six years now.”

“I know. But you’re a legend already. You bring great honor to our clan.”

“I only carry on a tradition that was begun countless generations before ours.”

A distant look came over An’sep. “When will the Gremlin Wars end?”

“I don’t know. They have been raging now since I was a child. They will end, I suppose, when the gremlins allow us to keep our territory in peace. But that is not likely to happen. Not ever.”

“I hate them.” An’sep said. “I don’t suppose that any creature beneath the gods could be more terrible.”

“No,” Kazkal agreed. “There’s nothing worse than a gremlin.”

As they found themselves passing the doors of their clan’s dwellings in the tunnel, a voice called out to them. “Kazkal! An’sep! I’ve come to find you!”

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Kazkal tried to make the figure out in the darkness. During the night time hours, the torches were kept at a minimal number, so that no gnome would be kept awake by the light who did not wish it. As the gnome who'd called them grew closer, holding a torch of his own, Kazkal recognized him with delight. "Jono! It's been only a week! Have you missed me so much that you abandon your own clan?" He laughed. "And where is Fraternus?"

Jono grinned as he approached and clapped Kazkal on the shoulder. Jono and Fraternus were the greatest archers in the Qadash tribe's army, and they had been on leave already for a week. "I'm afraid your grandfather has his ears and will not let him go. I volunteered to step outside and intercept you when you arrived. Your grandfather sends for you. Um..." Jono suppressed a giggle. "He's had perhaps...gallons...so far tonight."

Kazkal rolled his eyes, and An'sep laughed boyishly. "Spirits?" Kazkal asked.

"His own brew! But you know Meso even better than I. I only know him well enough to always accept when he invites me to his parties."

"He's throwing a party?"

"Yes! For the return of his mighty grandsons." He winked at An'sep.

Kazkal really just wanted to find his own door, crawl into bed, and sleep as though he had died in battle. He was so weary, more in mind than body. He needed the rest. And he wasn't sure

that he would have the patience for his grandfather's drunken enthusiasm over their return.

An'sep seemed apprehensive. "We *are* going, aren't we, Kaz?"

Kazkal let out a long sigh, and he smiled. "Well, I suppose we must go and rescue Fraternus after all. Lead on, Jono."

Jono grinned some more and turned back towards Meso's door.

"Is it a big party?" Kazkal asked, hoping it was not.

"No," Jono said. "Only a few of your cousins and such, and a handful of warriors from some of the other clans."

Kazkal felt relief wash over him.

They arrived at the door, and Jono threw it open without hesitation. The trio was greeted warmly. Kazkal's mother and both of An'sep's parents and brothers were there. Kazkal immediately noticed Fraternus seated by the fire, eyes glazed over, as Meso yammered on loudly and drunkenly. "Grandfather!" Kazkal called. Fraternus immediately came alive with relief at his rescue.

Meso made to stand, and a servant rushed to help him. The old gnome swatted him away. "Back away, Dentoo, you fool! I may be retired, but I've still a warrior's heart!" The servant bowed and backed away from the old gnome, but a look from Meso's wife kept him close, lest the old gnome should fall.

It was neither drink nor age alone that made it difficult for Meso No'tall to stand. It was rather the fact that he was old,

drunk, and had only one real leg and one eye. Meso finally managed to stand on his good foot and his wooden peg leg, and he held his arms out bidding Kazkal and An'sep to embrace him. Despite the wounds that had left him unable to fight fifteen years before, Meso still appeared formidable. He was a big gnome, fattened in the belly by fifteen years of continuous drink, but still quite muscular. A great scar passed beneath the patch which rested over his useless left eye socket. To see the wounds that Meso had endured and still risen to the level of patriarch over Clan No'tall, was to regard the old gnome with deep respect and know that his handicaps were not to be overestimated.

Fraternus gladly went to Jono's side, allowing Kazkal and An'sep each to embrace their grandfather in turn. An'sep wanted to stay at Kazkal's side, but his mother rushed up to him and hugged him and kissed him, in spite of his panicked squirming. Though it was now five years since, at the age of twelve, An'sep had left his home to become Kazkal's apprentice, his mother never ceased to treat him as a child. She wanted to be sure that Kazkal had treated him well, that he had eaten enough, that he had kept warm in winter weather. She had no interest at all in the tales of war her son could tell.

An'sep was relieved that his brothers and father waited where his mother was leading him. Surely they would be interested. Both of his older brothers had followed in their father's footsteps as makers of weapons; another No'tall legacy. They

would all three be eager to hear how their craft had aided in the war against the gremlins.

As for Kazkal, his mother laid a hand on his arm and kissed him on the cheek. “Have you been treating your apprentice well? You know, your Aunt Djreena worries constantly. She wishes he’d have done like his brothers.”

“Yes, Mother. An’sep is treated well. I assure you.”

Meso interrupted loudly. “Of course he’s treated well!” He shook his bearded head and looked to Kazkal. “Bah! Females! What do they know!” He nudged Kazkal. “I had an apprentice once named Trino, and I treated him well. Very well. The nights we spent...”

“Grandfather!” Kazkal was beginning to fear what his grandfather meant to reveal. There were certain secrets in the teachings of a warrior that were held sacred, and Meso was clearly very drunk.

Meso laughed loudly. “And my own teacher was a cousin, the mighty Jenjo No’tall, for whom we named An’sep’s father. And he treated me well. Taught me *everything* a young gnome should know. Those were perhaps the best seven years of my life.”

Kazkal looked to see Jono laughing at him. Fraternus seemed not to be listening, as he rubbed his temples beside pointed ears. He had apparently had more than enough of Meso’s drunken bellowing for one night, and perhaps a few sips himself of Meso’s angry brew.

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Meso looked to An'sep, who was listening attentively from across the room. "But that all ends quickly enough. And then it's time to settle down...somewhat." He gave his wife a loving stare, and a crooked smile. Then he laughed out loud and pointed a thumb in the direction of Fraternus and Jono. "Unless of course you're like these lads!"

Jono grinned and put a hand on Fraternus' shoulder.

An'sep looked at Jono and Fraternus. What a legendary bond they had. Jono had been an apprentice to Fraternus, and after the seven years had ended, he never did leave the other gnome's side. They were inseparable. Neither of them had since taken an apprentice or a wife. They were devoted entirely to the warrior life and to each other. An'sep hoped that one day it would be the same with himself and Kazkal. He wanted to be associated with his heroic cousin in the same way that Jono was associated with his mentor. It was unthinkable that those two should ever brave a danger or accept a mission one without the other. The general never even suggested it. Their legendary friendship made them better warriors. Their devotion to each other gave them double strength. An'sep felt that he could offer his own teacher such devotion, if Kazkal would allow it. An'sep even found himself jealous of anyone who would move to come between them. He hated it that he was only an apprentice, that he was so often separated from his teacher because of danger. Kazkal had often gone on missions with other warriors and left An'sep behind. How would An'sep ever prove himself to Kazkal

when he was always being kept *safe* with the other apprentices? He hoped that Kazkal never married or took a second apprentice, that he would never have to leave Kazkal's side, and that he would have plenty of opportunity to prove himself once he was named a warrior in full.

Kazkal shook his head and grinned. His eyes caught the familiar stride of one of Meso's servants approaching with a beer mug. "Kyana!" Kazkal thought of the way his grandfather had looked to his wife, and he wondered if he were regarding Kyana in the same light.

Kyana smiled as she handed the mug to Kazkal. "Greetings, Master Kazkal. I brought you something special."

Kazkal looked into the mug and, with relief, saw not his grandfather's brew but freshly squeezed blackberry juice. He took a sip and smiled at Kyana. "You remembered."

"How could I forget? Your philosophy is so different from your grandfather's."

She quoted him, "A warrior must always be at peak performance. Nothing must be allowed to dilute his mind, body, or soul." She giggled.

An'sep despised Kyana, and he broke from his parents and brothers at the sight of her flirtations. He approached Kazkal quickly. "Kazkal, I'm exhausted. When can we go home and sleep?"

Kazkal was really just beginning to enjoy himself, but he could not deny his apprentice's need for rest after their long

journey by foot from the warrior camp. He looked apologetically at his grandfather's lovely servant, then to An'sep. "We can leave whenever you like. Grandfather will understand."

An'sep couldn't help but sneer at Kyana. "Well, let's leave now then." He looked back to his cousin. "I can't seem to keep my eyes open."

"Very well." Kazkal looked at Kyana. "We can always come back tomorrow." The pair smiled at each other. Kyana bowed and walked back to the kitchen.

"Not so fast, young grandsons!" Meso put a hand on Kazkal's shoulder, and a solemn look came over him. "I have a gift for you, which I've kept for you since your father's death at the hands of the Darkgnomes when you were but a child. It's time you had it." He removed his hand and hobbled in the direction of his war room. A war room was something every clan patriarch had in his home, but none were as fine as the war room of Meso No'tall.

Kazkal and An'sep followed their grandfather into the shadowy room, and Meso lit some candles, closed the door, and walked to the far wall, behind his desk. Kazkal gasped as Meso reached for his finest treasure, which had been hanging on the wall unused for five years beyond a decade.

"Grandfather! Perhaps you've had too much..."

Meso turned sharply. "No, Kazkal. I have been meaning to do this for some time. I only needed to be sure that you were worthy of it."

“But, Grandfather! How could I be?”

Meso laughed loudly. “Kazkal! You have proved yourself as a competent and virtuous warrior time and again these past six years. The tales of your adventures and your righteousness reach me all the time. I know how to sift fact from exaggeration. I know what is true. You are a finer warrior than Clan No’tall has seen in many a generation. Finer than me! Finer than your father....” Meso raised a finger to stop Kazkal’s protest. “And he would proudly have agreed with me! This heirloom has been waiting for someone to carry it back into battle, where it belongs. Let it decide for itself if you are worthy.” Meso turned back to the gigantic battleaxe on the wall, and he took it down, as though it were the weight of a feather.

Kazkal was amazed that his aged, crippled, inebriated grandfather could lift such a weapon. He was amazed that any gnome could. The double edged axe head spanned wider than even Meso’s broad shoulders. It was unfathomable that Kazkal would even be able to hold it in his hands, or strap such a monster to his back and still move forward. But he knew that his grandfather once had, and he had seen his father with the weapon. “How would the weapon make such a judgment? Is it more than mere steel?”

Meso grinned crookedly. “Yes. This is a magical weapon, forged by our ancestors many centuries past with the help of a shaman. Only the worthy can lift it.”

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In awe, Kazkal reached for the axe. “The No’tall Battleaxe.” He gripped it with his fist, expecting to drop it as soon as Meso released it, but then he failed to even notice when Meso had let it go.

Meso laughed. “See? I told you so! The No’tall Battleaxe thirsts for battle once more! She chooses *you* to wield her!”

With wide eyes, Kazkal realized that he was holding the overwhelming weapon on his own. He was worthy after all. “But how do I know that this isn’t simply the weight of the weapon?” He looked to his apprentice. “Here, An’sep. You try.”

An’sep was sure that this was no test, for surely he would be just as worthy to wield the weapon of their ancestors. He took hold of the axe, and Kazkal let it go. An’sep yelped as he fell to the ground with the weapon. He jumped up, ashamed, leaving the weapon on the ground. He looked to his relatives, fearing condemnation. How could he have failed to hold it? How could he have been deemed unworthy? Panic filled his teary eyes.

Then Meso laughed louder than he had all night long. “Ah, lad! You’ll grow into it yet!” He slapped An’sep on the back, and the young gnome nearly fell over again. “It takes tempering of a gnome, before he can hold this weapon. Experience will temper you as the fire tempers the swords of your father and brothers. Perhaps you’ll be able to help your cousin bear it someday. Just not today, lad. Not today.” Meso laughed some more, and Kazkal, still unbelieving, lifted the axe from the ground with ease.

Meso set to work strapping the weapon to his grandson's back. When he was done, he stood back and admired the way Kazkal wore the battleaxe. How the axe blades spread like wings behind him. He smiled in wonder. Then he spoke, "Now, there is only one sort of creature whose flesh this axe will not penetrate."

Kazkal was shocked. "Really? Such a weapon as this can be stopped by a creature?"

Meso chuckled, his own fatigue beginning to show. "Yes, a very notable sort of creature it is." He smiled, paused for emphasis. "The innocent."

"The innocent what?" Kazkal asked.

Chuckling some more, Meso explained, "The innocent *anything*, lad! This axe will only kill those who have done true evil. The innocent will not be harmed by it. It shines with white light when you make to strike the innocent, because it's telling you to stay your hand. Oh, it'll knock them over pretty well, but not to their death. It will never pierce their flesh. And you must remain worthy in order to continue to carry her into battle. You must never forget your virtue. You must never take life needlessly."

"I never have."

"Yes, and the battleaxe knows that. She also knows that you are seasoned and strong, and otherwise a gnome of honor. This axe will be your greatest ally. You'll see in time. And none will be able to lift it against you, so long as you are true to her."

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An'sep reached out with a finger to run it along the sharpness of the blade on one side of the weapon, and the entire thing, from head to handle, began to emit the most soothing white light, illuminating the room in its soft glow. He looked at his finger, and it remained uncut.

Meso smiled. "Your apprentice has a need to see things for himself, even when it might have cost him dearly. He is fortunate in his innocence. And so are you, Kazkal. The world shines more brightly for the innocent."

After receiving the legendary family battleaxe, it was difficult for Kazkal to make his way home. Everyone wanted to stop him and admire the gift. His mother wanted a portrait painted, but Kazkal was very uncomfortable with all of the attention. He still didn't feel that he was truly worthy of such a gift.

Just so he could leave, he promised his mother that he would allow a portrait to be painted later in the week, if he was not called back to camp. Jono laughed at him. Jono was always laughing. Kazkal was glad, because without Jono to remind him from time to time how silly the things were that other gnomes took so seriously, Kazkal feared he would see the world itself as terribly grim.

When Kazkal and An'sep finally got home, to the home they hadn't seen in so very long, they went immediately to bed and fell deeply asleep. It was a very well earned sleep.

Kazkal awoke just after dawn to the sound of banging on his door. He sprang up, and An'sep sprang up beside him. "Who could that be?" the apprentice asked. "Perhaps we've been called back."

"I don't know." Kazkal quickly dressed and answered the door. He was startled to see a royal messenger.

"Kazkal No'tall. King Nesu has sent for you. He needs your help at once." The messenger looked to An'sep, who was eagerly getting dressed behind them.

"He asks that you come alone. The danger is great."

Kazkal looked behind him to his disappointed apprentice. "Sorry, An'sep. It's..."

"Too dangerous," the youth finished for him. "I know."

Kazkal turned back to the messenger. "I will gather what I need, take the boy to my grandfather's home, and I will be there right away. What's happened?"

"I cannot speak of it. The king wishes to tell you in person. It is a secret matter." The messenger then bowed his head and left Kazkal to his preparations.

Kazkal eyed the No'tall Battleaxe, wondering if it was right to take it with him just now, before he even felt comfortable wielding it.

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Kazkal arrived at the king's brightly lit home in the center of the territory of the nearly extinct Clan Qadash, the ruling clan of their tribe. He was led without preamble to the room that the king was in. He found that Nesu was far from alone. The tribe's shaman Malík and his apprentice Ak'ten were there, and the king's daughter lay on a bed, sleeping. Kazkal bowed down on his knees. "Your highness, how may Clan No'tall be of service this morning?"

"Rise, Kazkal," the king spoke in a sorrowful and angry voice.

"Hey, Kazkal!" the shaman's apprentice shouted excitedly. "You're the only one who can help us. Even Malík's magic won't help." Ak'ten was only two years younger than An'sep, and the two were bitter rivals. They both seemed bent on acquiring Kazkal's approval. They often fought. Kazkal noticed that the boy's hair had gotten very long, which was not common for the apprentice of a shaman.

"What has happened? The messenger you sent told me nothing," Kazkal said.

Nesu did not answer, but instead addressed the shaman. "Tell him, Malík."

"Princess Atalanta has been poisoned," Malík said simply.

"What? By who?"

“By the mud troll Grubello,” the shaman answered. “She is alive, but she will not remain so if we do not act quickly. The problem is the antidote requires an ingredient which would take too long to acquire. Tell me, Kazkal, do you know enough of mud trolls to guess at the game we play?”

Rage colored Kazkal’s face. “I’ve encountered this Grubello before. Sinister even for a mud troll. My guess would be that Grubello has the antidote, and we may have it under certain *conditions*.”

The king came alive then with anger, and he handed Kazkal a scroll that had been sent from the mud troll’s lair. “This devil Grubello has poisoned not only my daughter, but the prince of one of our neighboring tribes. His *conditions* are, as always, a deadly game. Between Tribe Qadash and Tribe Nebu-Ki, only one tribe’s royal child will be saved. Their king and I have been sent the same scroll. Grubello wishes for us to send our finest warriors, one from each tribe. You will both have to do battle with his champion, of which we know nothing. If one of you manages to emerge victorious, you will get the antidote, and the other warrior’s tribe will lose a young prince...or a princess.”

Malik spoke again. “With the scarcity of the needed ingredient, we are forced to accept Grubello’s challenge. Otherwise, Princess Atalanta will never awaken.”

Kazkal looked over at the sleeping princess. He looked at the scroll he’d been handed.

“That scroll contains the monster’s terms and a map to his lair.” Nesu turned away. “How I despise these mud trolls and their games. I am amazed that anyone got through to my daughter from outside. It has to have been a gnome! No mud troll could fit down here.”

The captain of the royal guard came in then. “Your highness! We’ve captured the intruder.”

Nesu was darkly curious. “Who is it?”

“It’s a gremlin, Majesty. Says his name is Klarth.”

Nesu considered. “A *gremlin*? In *my* home?”

Kazkal bristled. “How could a mud troll win the allegiance of gremlins? This is very strange. Perhaps this game is yet more complex.”

The king thought about it. “Yes. We’ll keep him alive for questioning, for now. In the meantime, Kazkal, I am asking you to represent our tribe in this matter.”

“I am honored, Majesty.”

Nesu smiled. “Surely I’m not the only one who deems you worthy. Is that not the legendary No’tall Battleaxe now strapped to your back? You wear it well. I haven’t seen that axe since the Darkgnomes drove us into gremlin territory so many years ago. Your father would be proud.”

“Thank you, Majesty.”

“May the gods side with you, Kazkal No’tall. Our tribe is counting on you. You will find in the scroll that you must travel

alone. Be wary of your surroundings. These mud trolls, as you well know, are devious.”

“Yes. I know. I will bring you back that antidote. Count on it.”

Kazkal arrived at the mud troll’s lair on squirrelback, complements of the king. He dismounted the well-trained animal and stepped into the mud. He found the entrance to Grubello’s hidden mud hole and let himself in. The stench was almost too much for the mighty gnome warrior, but he went on in spite of it. “Grubello! This is Kazkal No’tall, here to answer your challenge to Tribe Qadash!”

A female mud troll came into the main chamber and looked down from her more than one and a half foot height at the barely nine centimeter tall gnome warrior. “I Jy’ty’tity! Grubello busy now. He be out soon.” She smiled. Kazkal sneered. Jy’ty’tity was a disgusting sight to behold; covered in fat, bald, with greatly sagging breasts. Kazkal couldn’t wait to have this encounter finished.

Another mud troll, even uglier than Jy’ty’tity, came in, shouting, “Wife you! Go now! Cook Grubello food! And food for guests! We have game!” He started laughing, and he took note of the gnome. “No’tall.”

“Grubello. You’ve gone too far this time. Let us get this *game* behind us, so that I can take the antidote to my princess.”

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Grubello wore the antidote around his neck. He pointed to it. “This antidote, mean you? Ha ha ha! Patience, warrior gnome. We wait for other still.”

Kazkal had almost forgotten about his rival. He wondered who it could be. Though, considering the other warrior would be sent from Tribe Nebu-Ki, he had a pretty good idea.

Just then, another gnome entered Grubello’s muddy lair. “This must be the place,” he said with a smirk.

Kazkal was not surprised at the choice of his neighboring tribe. “Ben’d� Soran. I thought they’d send you.”

“Kazkal No’tall. I figured it would be you here as well. I guess we finally get to see which of us is the greatest.”

“That’s not exactly foremost on my mind.” Kazkal replied. “This competition sickens me. I only want to save my princess.”

“And I my prince. Unfortunately, we can’t save them both.” Ben’d� regarded Kazkal with unhidden malevolence.

“We will see,” was all Kazkal offered in reply.

Jy’ty’tity came running out from the kitchen. “More guests! You like muffins, small man?” She giggled and batted her eyelashes.

Grubello lost his temper. “Wife you! Me said in kitchen you! Me am playing game! Get out!”

“But Jy’ty’tity want to see Grubello work!”

“No!” Grubello pulled a switch from his belt and began to smack his wife in the head with it. “You go! Ugly! Smelly! I no like! Go slave away!”

“Oh!” Jy’ty’tity was wounded. “You no like Jy’ty’tity! Why you so mean!”

“Go!” He raised the switch again, and Jy’ty’tity scurried from the room.

“Well,” she shouted from the kitchen, “she no like you ugly, smelly, even *too* fat more! Jy’ty’tity want divorce!”

“Be quiet now! Or I eat you for lunch,” Grubello shouted back. He heard her sniffing, and he offered an evil grin to his guests. He lifted the antidote from his chest and waved it before them. “You know rules?”

“We read your idiot scroll, Grubello,” Ben’d du said. “Just let’s get this done.”

“Hm. Gnomes no fun,” mused the mud troll. He smiled again. “Gremlins much fun. Wait minute.”

Grubello pulled a lever on the wall, and a secret door opened up, revealing a gremlin on chains. “This Krat, my fighter. He kill you both, and both you babies die. Him brother went to poison you babies, so that Grubello would free Krat.” Grubello roared with laughter. “But Grubello no do it, even if him come back! Grubello always win!”

Kazkal and Ben’d du exchanged a glance. They knew that whichever one of them defeated Krat would still have to fight Grubello for the antidote. Mud trolls seldom played fair. This also answered Kazkal’s earlier wondering on how Grubello had gotten a gremlin to do his bidding. The gremlin they’d captured

in Nesu's home was Krat's brother, trying to rescue him. Kazkal despised Grubello all the more.

Ben'du turned to Kazkal. "At least it's just a gremlin. I figured there would be a twist, but this is nothing. Who cares about killing another gremlin, right?" He smiled at Kazkal, but Kazkal did not smile back.

"Grubello," Kazkal asked, as he removed the No'tall Battleaxe from his back, "when do we begin?"

"Hm. Since No'tall ask first...other one go first! Ha ha ha! Grubello so bad!"

"Good," Ben'du said. "I didn't realize we had to take turns. So when I kill this wretched gremlin, I get the antidote, and Kazkal doesn't even get a chance, correct?"

Grubello hadn't actually thought his game through that far. He thought about it. "Hm. That sound plenty unfair to Grubello." He smiled nastily. "Grubello like. Go ahead, stupid gnome."

Kazkal leaned over to his adversary. "Ben'du, I have an idea. Set the gremlin loose. I have a feeling he can help us."

Ben'du regarded Kazkal as though the other gnome were mad. "Are you *joking*? I would kill that gremlin even if he *wasn't* an enemy of Grubello! Gremlins are gremlins, and they should all die. They're just savages. Foul, disgusting savages. Even Grubello's a step up from them." He took his sword from his belt and addressed Grubello. "Does *it* get to use weapons?"

"No." Grubello said. "Only him claws."

Ben'du laughed. "Good." He turned to Kazkal. "This is too easy. Sorry about Princess Atalanta." He stepped up to the gremlin Krat, who came out of the doorway, still on chains, snarling. Ben'du lunged with his sword, but the gremlin leaped up, even with the weight of his chains. He punched the astonished Ben'du and pounced on him, knocking him to the ground. Ben'du tried to wrestle out of the gremlin's grip.

"Kill him, Krat! Or Grubello eat you for dinner!" the mud troll commanded.

Krat looked up to Grubello, radiating contempt for the mud troll. Ben'du took the opportunity to break free and kick the gremlin in the chin. Krat was fast to react, lunging at Ben'du and slicing at his rib cage with long, claw-like fingernails.

Ben'du cried out in pain. "You dirty animal!" He put a hand to his side and, when he raised it, found that it was covered in blood. He spotted his sword on the ground and moved to grab it, but the gremlin was on him.

"Kill him now!" Grubello shouted.

"No, wait!" Kazkal cried. "Let him go!"

"But I tell Krat if he no kill him, I eat him for dinner!"

Kazkal's skin crawled at what he knew of the mud troll diet, especially considering they usually devoured meat while it was still warm with life. "Why don't you eat Ben'du for dinner? We gnomes taste better anyway. Besides, you said gremlins were fun. You wouldn't really want to eat the one you've got would you?"

“Hm.” Grubello scratched his head. “Gremlin let gnome go now. He is loser. No’tall fight you now.”

Krat obeyed. As the gremlin walked away, Ben’du grabbed his sword. Krat heard the sound of steel sliding across the ground and turned instantly, pouncing on the gnome once more and slashing him twice across the chest with fierce claws. Ben’du cried out loudly, then fell silent.

“Ha ha ha!” Grubello laughed. “That dumb gnome going taste so good! Even if him cold. Maybe wash down wife!”

A cry from the kitchen followed Grubello’s last comment, “Jy’ty’tity *hate!*”

Grubello rolled his ugly, yellow eyes and mocked the sound of his wife’s voice, “‘Jytytity hate! Why no you *die!*” He laughed, as he heard her muffled sobs. He pointed to Kazkal. “No’tall. You now fight Krat for antidote.”

Kazkal walked over to face the gremlin. He spoke quietly. “You can understand me?”

The gremlin spoke in a raspy, tortured voice, “Yes. I know your tongue.”

“You only fought Ben’du, because you had no choice. If I cut your chains, we don’t have to fight.”

Krat didn’t know what to make of Kazkal’s observation.

“Grubello has no intention of freeing you, even after your brother did his bidding. I’m not fool enough to think that Grubello has any intention of handing over the antidote either,

even if I best you. We have a better chance, if you get out of those chains.”

The gremlin nodded.

“What you saying down there, smalls? Speak up! Grubello want hear you battle banter!”

Kazkal circled the gremlin, looking as though he were poised for battle. Then he lifted his axe to strike, aiming towards Krat, trying to make it look real, and his axe began to glow. “An innocent,” he realized. The gremlin was an innocent. Kazkal had never considered such a possibility. As a warrior, he had learned to lump all gremlins together. Now his perspective would never be the same. He brought the axe down and severed the chains that bound Krat to the wall. The gremlin ran to stand beside his rescuer, and the pair of them faced Grubello defiantly.

“No fair!” The mud troll raged. “No one get antidote now! Grubello win again!”

“I told you that you’d gone too far, Grubello! Now my battleaxe hungers for your murderer’s blood!”

Krat leaped up onto the mud troll and snatched the antidote from his neck. While Grubello was surprised, Kazkal threw the No’tall Battleaxe and severed his head from his neck, thus ending the mud troll’s deadly games forever.

Kazkal retrieved his axe and fastened it back to his back. Krat approached him then with a friendly smile; an expression Kazkal didn’t even know that gremlins could make. He handed the small bottle of antidote to Kazkal, and Kazkal nodded his

appreciation. “We have your brother captive. You have my word that I will ask for his release. Do you know where another bottle like this is? An empty one?”

“Yes,” said the gremlin, and he scurried off to fetch it.

“You can stop pretending to be dead now, Ben’du,” Kazkal said to the gnome lying defeated behind him. “We’re going to split the antidote.”

Ben’du stood up rigidly, his clothes stained with blood. “I wasn’t pretending anything, No’tall. I was knocked out.”

“Hm.”

“And what’s with you and that gremlin? Don’t go making the wrong sort of friends. He’s still a gremlin, and...”

“He dead! Oh, he dead!” The hysterical voice of Jy’ty’tity rang throughout the mud lair.

Kazkal began to reach for his axe, and Ben’du for his sword, then, “Me free! Jy’ty’tity free! Jy’ty’tity *love* Kazkal No’tall! Love him forever!” Jy’ty’tity got down on her hands and knees and covered Kazkal in slobbery troll kisses that knocked him to the ground. She then got up, kicked her dead husband’s head across the room, and ran outside screaming, “Free! Free! Jy’ty’tity free!”

Krat walked in with the empty bottle, laughing in good humor at the scene. Again, something Kazkal had not been aware that gremlins could do. He handed the bottle to Kazkal. “That went very well.”

“Yes.” Kazkal laughed, as he took the bottle and began to pour half of the antidote into it. “But then, you didn’t get covered in troll kisses.”

“No, I didn’t.” Krat laughed, then suddenly stopped. He looked down at his chest, and the steel blade that poked through from the back. He tried to grab hold, but his arms gave out, and he fell to the ground dead.

Kazkal looked in horror, as Ben’d� Soran removed his sword from the gremlin’s back. “As I was saying,” Ben’d� explained, “a gremlin is a gremlin.” He snatched one of the bottles from Kazkal’s hand and walked to the door. Then he turned. “I probably just saved your life, No’tall. You were on the verge of picking up a bad habit.”

“So help me, Ben’d�! Gremlins are gremlins, and gnomes are gnomes! But you are a back stabber! And *that* is far worse than a gremlin with honor!”

Ben’d� only laughed at Kazkal’s fury. “See you on the battlefield.” He waved then and was gone.

Later, after Princess Atalanta had been roused and seemed to be back in good health, the king heard Kazkal’s tale in full. “Tribe Qadash, especially my daughter and I, owe you more than I can put into words, Kazkal No’tall. How can I reward you?”

METROGNOMES: WORSE THAN A GREMLIN

“Help me to keep my word,” the warrior answered. “Release Klarth. For without the aid of his brother, I may not have succeeded.”

The king thought hard. “It is strange to me,” he spoke at last, “owing a debt to a gremlin. But I agree with you. I will release him. He will walk out of here unharmed. He will have to be taken to Malík though. Malík will put a spell of forgetfulness on Klarth, and he will not remember how to get through our defenses. How he even managed such a feat is yet another mystery to be solved. But he will go free.” The king noticed Kazkal’s troubled look. “What is it, Kazkal?”

“I was just thinking about An’sep. The things I’ve taught him. It seems I’ll have to amend a lesson. I told him there was nothing worse than a gremlin. Now I know that’s not true.” He thought of Ben’du Soran. “There are many worse things in the world.”

About the Author

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr. is the author of eleven books, including the novel *Cry, Wolf: Shadow of the Werewolf*, the short fiction anthology *The Great Debate*, the Gothic horror series *The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas*, and two fantasy series: *Metrognomes* and *The Legends of Nod*. He lives in Dallas, Texas, where he is currently hard at work on his next book.

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