

As we step off the bus, Jesse appears at the tree line across the mountain road. The bus reverses out of the drive and back onto the road. When I look back Jesse is gone.

Ike is already tapping in the code for the gate. It begins to swing open.

"Hold on, I saw Jesse over there," I say. I dash across the street and into the ditch on the other side. A shoeprint marks a patch of snow.

"Jesse!" I call into the woods. "Hey Jess are you there?"

No response.

"You sure you saw him?" Ike asks.

I frown at him. "Yes. His footprint is right here."

I turn back to the woods. Branches quiver further up the sloping tree covered hill. I start into the trees.

"Taylor, what are you doing?" Ike yells. "McGarrett will be waiting to update us. He's going to want us to get ready for tonight's hunt."

I don't respond and start into the woods. A twig snaps ahead, and I move quicker. Jesse is messing with me and I'm not about to let him think I'm scared.

"Jesse!" I shout again.

This time the movement up ahead is even more evident as several stones roll toward me. I drive forward, though running up a steep gravelly slope it's not easy.

I pull myself over a boulder and notice an extraordinarily wide crevice large enough Jesse could slip into it. How deep is it? I can't see his outline. A foul stench seeps up from the hole, hopefully not from Jesse. Otherwise he needs a long bath with some industrial soap.

"Jesse, I know you're in there! Come out, before I come in," I say.

I take a deep breath, knowing he won't end this until I've literally come face to face with him. As I step my left foot into the crevice, I feel a sharp searing pain into my ankle. I yank it back and something blue-grey flies past my head. I turn to see what it was, but it landed on the other side of the boulder. I scramble across the stone and look down. The dense ground foliage shivers as something moves away from me within it. I try to think what sort of animal in this area is blue and grey.

I get ready to jump down and pursue, when there is a wild hiss behind me. I spin and see several set of glowing orange, red, and yellow eyes. A word surges in my mind, "Goblins."

An orange demon leaps at me. I twist to the side and it tumbles to the ground behind the boulder. Three more goblins slink out of the dark crevice, green, yellow-black, and brown. None are

larger than two feet in height, but they are armed with handmade weapons; a stone-bladed knife, a tree-limb club, and a sling and rock.

I'm unarmed. I look at my surroundings. I sweep up a few fist sized rocks and hurl them at the goblins. They scamper side to side avoiding my attacks.

Scratching behind me signals the other demon trying to climb back up the boulder. I leap off the boulder and scramble for a fallen pine branch. It'll have to work as a staff or spear, though the end isn't very sharp. I only trained with a staff a few times knowing a sword is the primary weapon to kill a HowlSage.

"Taylor!" a voice yells behind me. It's Ike. I glance at him, but turn back to the goblins immediately. "Go get McGarrett."

"Taylor, catch,"

I turn and Ike tosses a pocketknife to me. It falls at my feet. I grab it from the ground and extend the blade as I rise to meet the demons. The sight of the pocket knife doesn't cause them to hesitate.

The green goblin raises its club and drives toward me.

I jump left and it misses, but the demon doesn't fall off the boulder. It spins to attack. I pivot to see other two goblins. The green goblin snarls and starts for me again, but suddenly drops to the ground in a puddle of nasty smelling greenish ooze. Ike has a crossbow out.

"Behind you!" Ike yells.

I spin-kick and plant my shoe squarely against the orange demon's head. It spirals and falls backward. I leap off the boulder and slash across its neck with the blade of the pocket knife. Its body melts away, an oozy orange slime bubbling into the earth.

I run toward Ike when the blue-grey demon drops from a tree branch onto my back. It sinks its claws into my neck and I twist violently to remove it. Ike runs to my side and stabs it with the point of a crossbow bolt. The demon falls backward onto the ground and melts into a puddle.

"Two more," I say.

Ike shakes his head, "Way more!" He points. Nearly a dozen more goblins stand atop the boulder.

"Let's go." We dash down the hillside toward the road. We need only get through the gates of The Pink Hippo and we'll be safe. The property is well protected against demons.

Screeches, snarls, and branches cracking echo behind us. They're fast in pursuit. Though not overly intelligent, goblins are powerful in a horde. I look back and see the swarm of colorful demons scrambling after us.

Ike and I break through the tree line and dash through the ditch. My feet plunge into a slushy puddle of melting snow. We cross the two lane road and are through the gate, but several demons stumble out onto the road. A horn blares up the road as a logging truck tries to stop before slamming into the creatures, the driver probably assumes they're woodland animals. Three demons are squished and a fourth barely escapes doom and scampers off into the trees. The puddles of goblin ooze dissipate by the time the driver climbs from the truck.

"You two see that?" the burly driver asks. He removes his dirty St. Louis Cardinals cap and scratches his head.

Ike and I shake our heads unconvincingly.

The driver bends down and peers under his semi. He stands up. "You boys playin' some kinda trick?"

"No, sir," I promise.

"If this truck'd been loaded, we'd all be dead," he warns. "It ain't safe to mess around with log trucks."

I imagine logs twisted and strewn all across the road, and yes probably covering the area Ike and I stand.

We say nothing.

The driver rubs his eyes and shakes his head. "I gotta quit putting in these long hours," he says to no one in particular. "Well alright you boys get on home then." He turns and walks back to his truck.

The engine rumbles and the tractor trailer jerks as it groans forward. The semi disappears around a curve on its ascent up the mountain.

I scour the tree line but there's no sign of goblins.

"That was close," Ike says.

"Where'd you learn to shoot like that?" I ask.

"I've been training with a crossbow for a long time," Ike says. "Dad said a good scientist doesn't just stay in the lab. They need to understand their enemy."

I shrug. "Makes sense. And how come those goblins dissolved so easily." I start to hand back the pocketknife.

"Hold on to it. You never know when you might need it," he says. "The blade of the knife and the bolts for my crossbow, are made of a blend of platinum, gold, silver, and copper. Surprisingly enough, copper is what does in the goblins."

"Like a penny?"

“Yep, good old Abraham Lincoln slays the goblins.”