

CHAPTER 6

The Goblin Wand

Muffled words hovered in nothingness.

“Wake up...”

The words echoed.

“Ira! Wake up!”

A flood of light pulled Ira back into existence.

“I thought you were dead!” said Peter.

“When have you ever seen a dead person?” Lilly said

Ira blinked the blur out of his eyes. Peter and Lilly were on his left. The goblins, unconscious, were on his right. They were all wound tight in thin ropes, dangling from a drooping tree limb.

Despite their current predicament, Ira had only one question. One thing he’d wanted to ask since finding Peter.

“Where’s Abigail?” he said.

“Like I told Lilly: the last thing I remember is Crude cornering us in the hallway. I woke up with those little green creatures ready to cook me. I didn’t see Abigail anywhere,” said Peter.

“Where are we, anyway?”

“Like I told you: it’s a long story,” said Lilly, “and right now we have more urgent things to worry about.”

Hundreds of tiny people with red mushroom-top hats – the goblins had called them Redcaps – were busy preparing something. Several of them held mouse skull bowls with burning herbs inside. The smoke spiraled around Ira. He’d only smelled smoke a handful of times before then. Usually when Helga scorched a meal, if you could call them meals in the first place. The most memorable time, however, was the orphanage fire. He’d been much younger then but hadn’t forgotten that night. Whatever the Redcaps were burning, it was nothing like that musky biting smell he remembered. This smoke had a lighter, sweet scent, but the Redcaps surely didn’t have sweet intentions.

Piles of unusual bones cluttered the ground. What creatures they might have belonged to, and what gruesome end they might have suffered, was a mystery. Ira wanted to keep it that way.

The Redcaps painted blue and white handprints on each other’s faces and bodies, beating drums, and humming a three-note mantra. The smoke grew thick and slithered intentionally toward a dark cavern among the trees.

“This can’t be good,” said Peter.

Ira searched for any means of escape. The Redcaps didn’t appear to have much experience capturing people of his size. If he stretched his legs and pointed his toes, he could

nearly touch the ground. And the handle of Snakeweed's twisted wand peeked out from the goblin's ropes.

"Rock with me," he said as he shifted his weight back and forth.

Lilly and Peter asked no questions. They rocked themselves in time with Ira.

"I can almost reach Snakeweed's wand," said Ira. "Then we'll just have to find a way to get it to Lilly." His feet brushed the blackened wood handle. "One more time..."

The three were completely in sync. Their bodies rocked toward Snakeweed, Ira kicked up his feet, his heels made contact, but the wand slipped between his ankles and fell to the dirt.

The Redcaps were on their knees now, bowing with outstretched arms toward the mouth of the cave, where a massive shadow moved inside.

Ira stretched his legs. His toes almost reached the wand.

"Bounce," he said.

The three bounced up and down. The limb bent a bit further with every bounce. After a handful of tries, Ira's feet clasped the wand.

"I got it," Ira said, laughing with triumph. "I got –."

The limb cracked.

The kids and goblins dropped to the ground, with the tree limb thudding hard beside them.

Every single redcap turned toward the sound. A single indistinct war cry was followed by a crowd of wailing redcaps stampeding forward, bows and spears at the ready.

At the same time, an enormous creature emerged from the cave. It was a colossal spider – at least the size of city bus – with black scales covering its body. The monster's eight poison-

green eyes fixed on Ira as the beast lumbered forward. Redcaps scattered like ants below its thundering stomps.

“What in the hell is that?” said Lilly.

Ira sprung to his feet, keeping his ankle grip on the wand. Lilly and Peter followed suit.

“Hop away!” he said.

The three hopped as fast as they could, but it was hopeless. They were towing a tree limb and the two sleeping goblins behind them.

The ground quaked, destroying any balance the three had been able to keep. In a moment they were on their backs.

Ira shifted the wand between his feet, aiming it toward the spider, which was now moments away from striking Lilly with its massive, slimy fangs.

“Ignitaom!” Ira wailed.

Time slowed. Warmth jolted from his chest and vibrated to his feet as a fiery blast exploded from the wand. The spider lurched backwards, dodging the flames which crackled and evaporated in the distance.

The force of the spell had sent the wand flying six feet away. Ira wiggled in the dirt, waiting to be the monster’s next meal.

Redcaps re-emerged – chanting their tune – forming a circle around the children. Sweet smoke seeped around them, drawing the spider nearer.

Just then, something cut through the smoke, breaking its trail. It might have been the wind, but there was a plume of dust and pattering footsteps. Ira’s ropes snapped and dropped to the ground. The same happened for Lilly, and Peter. They were free.

The goblin's wand floated to Ira and hovered in place. "Take it," a disembodied voice said, "do that spell again."

Ira snatched the wand and aimed it at the spider. Before he could even say the incantation, a burst of fire rolled from the tip of the wand. It was a direct hit. Shielding a scorched eye, the beast screeched and skittered back.

The Redcaps were not eager to retreat. Toothpick arrows flew from all directions. Ira spun the wand around, creating a wall of fire between himself and half of the Redcaps.

"Follow my footprints," said the voice. Little foot-shaped indents pelted the dirt, but whatever made them was completely invisible.

"What are you waiting for?" said Lilly, hopping over a row of Redcaps.

Ira and Peter followed.

They ran for several minutes, Ira blasting blind balls of fire over his shoulder.

"Calm down with that or we'll never lose them," said the voice. "This way!"

The footprints lead them off the beaten path, through a narrow opening into a secluded clearing near a pond. A dome of foliage surrounded the area, hiding it from anyone, or anything, that might pass by.

Ira collapsed. He hadn't slept or eaten in over a day, he'd been pursued by man-eating goblins, captured by a tribe of little mushroom people, and was almost eaten by a giant spider. It was hot, muggy, and now his life was in the hands of a little invisible man.

"You dragged me out here to hunt fluttergeists, not children." A woman, no taller than the goblins, floated forward. Without her pointed hat, she might have been half their size. In one hand she carried a fancy parasol, the other held her gown out of the mud. Her velvet gloves matched the large bow resting on her bustle.

“I had to do something. Redcaps were gonna feed these three to a dracnid.” The invisible man dressed himself, his clothes taking the shape of a short pudgy body, about the same height as the woman.

“You took care of redcaps and a dracnid?” said the woman. “I don’t believe it.”

“I can’t take credit for any of that, but thank you for your vote of confidence,” the man said as he placed a hat resembling a stubby unwashed parsnip onto his invisible head. “The boy took care of the dracnid. He used a goblin wand.”

“Did he?” The woman gave Ira a long silent stare. He was generally good at reading people but had no idea what she might be thinking.

“With a fire spell,” said the man.

A transparent blur began to fill the floating clothes and solidified into a body. An untidy bird’s nest of a beard hung down to a pair of stubby legs and puffed out past the little man’s shoulders.

“Who...” Ira finally managed, “What...”

“Oh, yes,” said the bearded man, “Introductions.” He looked up at Ira with a buck-toothed smile. “Addis Cocklebur, at your service. And this is—”

“Nola Dindle,” the woman interrupted. She looked from her sludge crusted shoes to Addis. “And my shoes are ruined.” She curtsied with a sarcastic nod, glaring at Addis.

“You’ve answered the *who*. Now onto the *what*,” said Lilly.

“*What?* What do you mean, *what?*” said Addis.

“You aren’t from the university, are you?” Nola said.

“N –” Peter started.

“Yes,” Ira cut in. What would these two do with people from another world? It wasn’t

worth finding out. “We need to get back to the university.” Ira recalled the name of the university on the title page of the spell book and added, “Bogmire University.”

“You’re from Bogmire?” said Nola, looking the kids up and down. “In those clothes?”

Ira looked down at his dirty oversized sweater and his ears went warm. Compared to this little woman he must have looked homeless. Technically he was.

“You say you’re from the university, but you don’t know what a gnome is?” said Addis.

“Gnomes?” said Lilly. “Gnomes aren’t real.”

“The redcaps got us with their poison arrows,” said Ira, thinking on his feet. He moved himself between the gnomes and Lilly, forcing their attention onto him. “We’re still a bit groggy.”

Addis squinted at Ira. “How did you get all the way out here?”

“We were... also hunting flutter-guys.”

“Fluttergeists,” Addis raised a suspicious eyebrow.

“Yes, fluttergeists. That’s what I said.”

“Why do you have a goblin wand, and where are your incantums?”

“I took this wand from the goblins. They wanted to eat us. That’s when the redcaps showed up. Annnd, remind me what an incantum is.”

“The redcaps must have hit you with a heavy dose,” said Addis. “Incantum – your magical catalyst. Like the wand you’re holding, or my staff,” Addis picked up a gnarled staff with a peculiar orb at its end. “Or Nola’s parasol.” Addis poked his staff in Nola’s direction.

“Oh, right – the redcaps must have taken our incantums.” Ira shrugged.

“That’s unfortunate. If the redcaps have them, you’ll never see them again,” said Nola.

“You know, Professor Dindle and I are teachers at Bogmire. I’ve never seen you before. Have you, Nola?”

“I have not.”

“We’re new,” Ira said.

“New enough to not understand the rules?” said Nola. “Students are not to venture off campus unless accompanied by a faculty member.” She said, as if reciting it from a book. “This is not a very hospitable world. Especially for humans, and extra especially for human children.”

“You caught us,” Ira shrugged. “We really wanted to see the fluttergeists. We snuck out last night.”

“You wanted to see the fluttergeists?” said Addis.

“That’s right.”

“And your names are?”

“Gowerly. Ira Gowerly. This is my sister, Lilly, and our friend, Peter Crude.”

The gnomes exchanged a glance.

“You were lucky Ms. Dindle and I were here, otherwise you’d be goners. We’ll take you back to Bogmire, and you can explain yourselves to Macazlan.”

“Yes, of course,” said Ira. “But there’s one more of us out here: Abigail. We lost her.”

“Well then, we should hurry back to Bogmire right away. We can use a scrying glass to find her.”

“We can’t leave her out here with the goblins, redcaps, and spiders,” Ira said.

“There are more dangerous creatures than that in these woods. We’ll have more of a chance to find your friend with a scrying glass.”

“We should get a move on,” said Nola. “Redcaps don’t give up. They’ll find us eventually.”

The gnomes left the clearing through an opening so small that Ira and the others had to crawl on their hands and knees.

Lilly held Ira back for a moment. “Why did you lie?” she scolded. “They seem like they want to help. Addis saved us from the spider.”

“How do we know they aren’t just keeping us alive so they can eat us?” Ira said. “That’s what everything else has wanted to do, after all. I don’t think we should trust anyone. Who knows what they’d do to people from another world. We need them to trust us. We need their help to find Abigail.”

“We need them to trust us. So, let’s lie to them? What do we do when we get to the university? They’ll know we’re lying.”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead yet.”

“You’d better come up with something quick.”