

GOBLIN TAILS THE ANTHOLOGY



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Poison Clan Press
5924 45 St. Cres.
Innisfail, Ab.
T4G 1L4

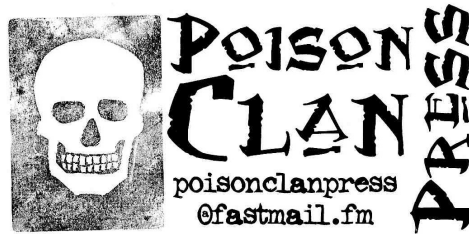
Direct correspondence & submissions to

Poison Clan Press
72 N. Hinsdale Road, Chesterfield,
New Hampshire
United States of America 03443

ISBN 0-9735940-0-4

Cover illustration by Aarron Norell, colored by
Graham Baldrey.

Printed in the U.S.A.



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Published by Poison Clan Press

CHUBA THE GOBLIN was created by Chris McCoy and is used with his permission. Otherwise all stories, places and characters herein are property of their respective creators.

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OF PATRONS AND PURPOSE:

Hoeing Rows, Defying Dares and Righting Wrongs

Ed Gentry



Illustration by Daan Vinke

His tiny black eye cracked open as a low moan crept past his lips. Chuba rolled over, burying his head more deeply into the loose pile of hay on which he slept. Suddenly, the goblin sprang to his feet, crouching low, letting his eyes adjust to the bright spring sunrise peeking in through the cracks of the barn. He scanned the large space around him and found nothing.

Chuba shook his head and plopped down on his backside. As he began to lie down, the tiny goblin almost choked in surprise on the chuckle in his throat as a voice began to speak.

“Thanks to ye for keeping that straw warm lad, but I believe that’ll be sufficient.”

Chuba rolled onto his feet once again and scrambled for the door, some twenty of his tiny paces away, not bothering to look back at the speaker. His gangly legs flailed, racing with his torso as he ran. He leaped an overturned bucket, swerved past a thick wooden post on which hung a sack of chicken feed, and prepared to slide under the obese cow in his path when suddenly his feet lost the ground and found themselves slicing through the air.

“Now, now. Ye mustn’t be off before I can repay ye for heating my straw,” said the gaunt, silver-haired man as a grin revealed his nearly toothless maw.

“Please! Chuba free!” Chuba said. Even with his limited vocabulary in the human tongue, ‘please’ was a word Chuba knew well. Too well. ‘Free’, while still a new word for him, had quickly become Chuba’s favorite.

The old man held Chuba out before him, eyeing him carefully. “Free? Of course ye’re free, ye dolt. What in King Wekelle’s name are ye talking about?”

Chuba stared with dull eyes, his body going limp. The old man’s nose was so sharp and crooked it looked as though it could be used as a weapon to slice Chuba’s scaly flesh from his bones. “Keeg Vekle?”

The tall man grimaced and shook his head as he lowered Chuba until the goblin’s feet once again found the ground beneath them. Each of them, man and goblin alike, took a step back and stared at one another for a long moment.

“King Wekelle,” the man said softly.

“Kee-eeng Vekle,” Chuba said, careful to enunciate each

word.

“Close enough, I suppose,” the man said, as he pulled a bale of hay under him and sat down. “Now, do ye want to tell me what ye’re doing in my barn?”

“Chuba sleep.”

“Aye. I’d gathered that, lad. But why here? Where’s yer den?”

Chuba lowered himself to sit as well and nodded. There was logic in the man’s question. “Chuba no den. Chuba free,” he said, spreading his arms wide, first one, then the other.

The man nodded. “Ye’re an explorer, eh? Got a bit of the wandering spirit in ye.”

Chuba nodded with a tooth-filled smile that might have been grotesque were it not for the swell in his chest that accompanied it.

“Aye, I know that road. It’s a fine one, to be sure,” the old man said as he stared past the goblin, out through the open door to the road.

Chuba glanced behind himself to take in the road, as well, and nodded. “You explore?”

“Not anymore,” the man said, rising quickly to his feet.

Chuba watched as the elderly human exited the barn, picking up a long stick of some sort on his way. He sat in silence a few moments, staring out the door after the man. He rubbed his diminutive green hands together and glanced around at the now empty barn. It was more eerie than it had seemed the previous night. Even washed in the morning’s light, it felt confining and cold. It wasn’t until Chuba heard the whistling of a lively tune that his curiosity and nerves got the better of him and he walked outside.

Hilson Havredar swung the hoe down, grunting against the vibration in the handle as the head bit into the hard earth. Straining against the tenacious soil, he pulled a crooked row until the field would simply have no more and spit his tool back out at him. This was how it was for him as a farmer: always fighting against a foe that rarely yielded and never making any real progress. Catching his breath, he pulled his drab, brown shirt loose from his trousers

and wiped the sweat from his brow. He began whistling again. Most people said that whistling makes the work easier. Hilson knew most people were fools.

“Food?” the goblin asked from behind him.

Hilson turned around and saw that the little creature was crouched down, sniffing at a short stalk of corn that sprouted from the ground. “Aye, but don’t eat it.”

Chuba stood with his hands out wide and nodded.

“It’s not yet ripe is all I mean.”

Chuba nodded and lowered his arms to once again rest at his side.

“Here,” Hilson said as he pulled a carrot from the ground and tossed it to the creature. “Those things should be good.”

The orange stick hit the ground at Chuba’s feet, but the goblin’s eyes never left Havredar’s face. “Chuba eat?”

“Aye,” Hilson said as he pulled another carrot out for himself. He brushed the dirt off and crunched into the fleshy pulp.

Faster than Hilson’s old eyes could discern, Chuba swept the vegetable into his mouth and chomped furiously. After only a moment, nothing at all remained.

“Wekelle’s Grace, lad! I’ve never seen anyone eat like that in my life,” Hilson said.

The goblin lowered his eyes to the ground and knelt in the field’s dry soil.

“Stand up!” Hilson said.

Chuba bolted to his feet as the man stormed toward him. The goblin froze, standing perfectly still.

Hilson stood close to the creature, his eyes wide and his breath heavy. A few moments passed in silence before the man began to nod. “Ye had a master once,” Hilson stated, more than asked.

Chuba nodded as he finally dared a glance up toward the man.

“Listen to me, Chuba. This is Orensling. Here we pay homage to our King and our Gods, but we never bow in forced fealty to any man.”

Chuba furrowed his brow and shook his head.

“We don’t have slaves here. It’s against the laws of our Kingdom,” Hilson said.

“No slave?” Chuba asked, his brow digging deeper into his

face.

“No. Never.”

Chuba straightened his back to stand tall. After a few moments, he glanced around quickly and then opened his tattered cloak that also served as a blanket. He motioned for Havredar to lean in.

Havredar did and smiled as he read the words sewn into the goblin’s worn cloak. “Chuba Free.”

The small goblin looked into the man’s eyes and raised a pudgy eyebrow.

Hilson nodded and straightened himself with a groan.

Chuba looked as though he might cry at any moment and Hilson knew it might only be proper if the goblin did just that. The man walked back to the row he was carving and swung the hoe again, granting some limited privacy to the small creature.

He had managed a few feet through the dirt when he heard a loud noise in the barn behind him. He turned to see the goblin emerge from the structure with a small garden hoe in his hands. Chuba ran to where the man was standing and launched the tool into the ground with a grunt. He pulled hard and fell squarely onto his hind end as the hoe dislodged itself from the soil.

Hilson chuckled and knelt down to show the goblin how to manage the job properly. Or, at least, as best as he himself knew. He was no farmer, after all. But one did what one must in Orensling. Hilson Havredar would never shirk his duty, be it to save his King or plant his potatoes.

Chuba chuckled when he saw the smirk riding Hilson’s face. The goblin had awoken before sunrise and had begun planting the new crop, whatever it was. He had learned a great many things about farming in the past two weeks, but the names of these vegetables was certainly not one of them.

The most important lesson he had learned, though, was the earlier you got the hard work done with, the better the day you had. Other goblins would never understand that, Chuba knew. They slept away most of the day, piled atop one another in dank

caves, fearing the next time neighboring orcs got bored and decided to raid them. It was a life Chuba could barely comprehend after his time on the road, or his time here.

“Ye may have awoken earlier than I, but I dare ye to match my pace today, ye spindly-legged son of an orc,” Hilson said as he knelt down to inspect the new seeds.

“Chuba too fast for old man.”

“Ye’re probably right. This old body ain’t much for work these days,” Hilson replied with a laugh.

Chuba stopped burrowing the seeds into the earth and stared hard at his new friend. That is what Hilson was to him now and Chuba relished having a friend. A human one, no less!

“No other goblin here,” Chuba said.

Hilson looked up into the eyes of the small green creature for a moment before nodding. “Aye. I wondered when we might speak of this. Ask yer questions, then.”

“Hilson say no slave here?”

“That’s right. Orensling hasn’t allowed slaves for many, many years. Goblin, orc, human or otherwise.”

“But no goblin or orc here,” Chuba said, waving an arm out over the rolling green and brown hills covered with rows of crops at every neighboring farm.

Hilson let out a breath that seemed to hang between them and nodded once again. “Ye know humans usually have no love of yer kind.”

Chuba nodded. “But Chuba here. Chuba here with Hilson.”

“Maybe I’m not human, eh?” Hilson asked as a grin stretched his lips.

Chuba stood silently without moving at all.

Hilson sighed again and rose to his feet. “Chuba, do ye believe that I mean to harm ye?”

Chuba recoiled and shook his head from side to side.

“Good. Some humans would, of course, but I’m not one of them. I suppose it’s only right that you want to know why that is.”

“Empty bed,” Chuba said, pointing to the house.

Chuba had slept in the barn the first few nights he had been on this farm, trying to figure out why this strange human hadn’t killed him, and even more strangely, why the man taught Chuba about

farming. One day, Hilson had told Chuba that he may as well sleep in the house if he was going to stay on as a farmhand. Chuba had slept in that small bed for over a week before he began to wonder why it was there at all.

“Aye. The empty bed. It was my son’s.”

“He get family, have farm?” Chuba asked. The habits of human families had always been curious but appealing to him.

“No. He died six years ago. Do ye know how long a year is, Chuba?”

Chuba knew Hilson wasn’t taunting his intelligence. It was common knowledge that goblins placed little value on learning to keep time. “Snow to sun to snow.”

Hilson turned to face the goblin, without rising from his knees, and nodded.

“Long time,” Chuba said, knowing full well exactly how long that was. Being a slave and having a master had a way of making one feel the passage of every moment.

“Aye, a very long time.”

The old man let himself down slowly to fully rest on his rear as he let loose a long sigh. Chuba watched his friend sit as still as the scarecrow that loomed behind him for a long time, finding no words to give the man. Chuba suddenly sprang to his right, his body sprawled wide through the air, coming to a crash in the carrots. He rose again and darted off through the rows of sickly corn.

“Fregzel!” Chuba cried. The crops had been plagued for weeks by fregzels, small rodents that could eat their own body weight in produce everyday.

Hilson sprang to his feet and joined in the chase. His long strides brought him easily to pace with Chuba a few rows into the field.

“Where?”

Chuba’s eyes darted back and forth. “There!” he said, pointing to his left.

The two gave chase through the field, Chuba howling in frustration every time the bothersome creature disappeared into the soil again. Hilson was always right behind him, shouting to keep the chase on. The old man hummed a battle hymn at twice its usual

pace between his labored breaths. Chuba dove at the ground repeatedly, almost snaring the rodent with his slim fingers, but always somehow just missing. They had covered nearly half of the slowly browning cornfield, when Hilson finally knelt, panting. Chuba stopped the chase and crouched beside the old man.

Hilson laughed and said, "Thank ye, lad."

"Chuba no catch fregzel," the goblin said.

"Aye. They're hard to catch when they aren't there in the first place."

Chuba stood and took a step back.

"I do love the chase, even if there's nothing to chase. I thank ye for that, lad. Ye got a sad old man on his feet again. That's no small thing, son."

Chuba shook his head and grinned as he said, "Old man welcome." Chuba didn't feel as clever as he had a moment ago, but he felt good.

Chuba was used to attracting attention when he accompanied Hilson to the market to sell their produce, but it had never been like this. Every set of eyes in the tavern was on him now. Every mug rested on its table and every conversation came to a halt. He turned to Hilson who merely strode toward the bar, giving nods of greeting to the many farming men of Orensling on the way. The dark wood of the walls was marred and smoke hung in the air, shifting slightly like a cloud of gnats on a warm evening, almost looking still.

"Good eve, Gorsch. A mug of yer best for me and my friend, if ye please," Hilson said as he settled into a stool at the bar.

Chuba grasped the impossibly shined rail that ran the length of the bar and pulled himself up into the closest stool.

"A mug for yourself is easy enough, Sir Havredar..." the fat, dark-haired young man behind the bar said.

Hilson raised an eyebrow and smiled at the man.

The young man's face flashed red as he nodded his head to Chuba.

Hilson's eyebrow climbed higher on his wrinkled face and he

leaned in, waiting.

“Two mugs, then,” the bartender said after a short pause.

A murmur rippled through the room bringing the place to life again. Soon the whispers started. Men huddled together with others at neighboring tables and many heads shook. The tavern itself seemed to take in a breath of surprise, the walls stretching themselves underneath the layers of dust and smoke.

Chuba accepted the large drinking vessel from the barkeep and took a long drink. The heat of the potable sped down his throat and into his chest as if it were a hound after a fox in its hole. He set his mug upon the bar and smiled at Hilson.

He motioned for the man to lean in. When he had, Chuba whispered, “Sir?”

Hilson nodded and pointed to a silver and black emblem covered in dust that hung on the wall behind the bar. A thick, silver sun effused from an arabesque of gold, all laid into a matte black background, its tendril-like rays blending into the black at their tips. Chuba could not read the words inscribed beneath it, but he struggled to do so all the same.

“It says, ‘Serve any man as you would your King’,” Hilson whispered. “It’s the creed of the Knights of Oren.”

Chuba continued to stare at the plaque and nodded. He jerked back suddenly as a flash of movement to his right stole his attention. He turned to see a small man with blonde ringlets framing his face, slamming his flat palm onto the bar next to him.

“Good eve, Rawn,” Hilson said without turning to look at the man.

“Is it? It seemed to me that the moon looked a little *green* tonight. Bad omen, ain’t it?” the man said in a raised voice, smiling as murmurs of assent rose from the crowd.

“Green like the vegetables most of us in this room grow?” Hilson asked.

Rawn’s eyes rolled and he stepped away from the bar. He gave the patrons a grin for a moment before turning to gaze upon Chuba.

“Does it speak, Hilson?” he said, pointing limply to Chuba.

“Ask *him*.”

Rawn’s eyes went askew as he leaned in slightly. “Do you

“speak, beast?”

Chuba looked to Hilson who nodded with a soft smile, and then to the blonde man before him. Several long moments passed, each one showing the patrons leaning further in to hear the response.

Finally, Rawn spoke again. “I asked you if you spoke.”

Chuba glanced over each of his own shoulders and turned to face the man again. “You say beast.”

“Aye, I called you a beast.”

“Oh. You talk to Chuba. Chuba think small man’s sister here.”

Laughter resounded off every wall but ended quickly. Rawn glared around the room, his eyes narrow.

Chuba swigged from his own cup as another quick burst of muted laughter rolled through the room. He glanced to Hilson whose face was suddenly flat and plain. Chuba had never seen it this way before.

“Hilson, you should really teach your dog better tricks,” the blonde man said.

“Knights are not in the habit of keeping pets, Rawn. We do, however, seem to attract worthy company,” Hilson said, finally turning to face the younger man.

“An old man who thinks he’s still a ‘Knight’ and his pet goblin. Surely now, Orensling has seen it all,” Rawn said.

“A Knight is always a Knight, Rawn,” said Gorsch as he slung his rag onto his left shoulder.

Hilson smiled at the bartender and patted his hand in the air.

“Not when their King is dead and the new King has turned away their fealty, Gorsch. Not that you would know, having never served in the militia,” Rawn said, nodding down toward the lame hand Gorsch had been born with.

Gorsch slowly sat down the glass he was filling with the very stumped fingers Rawn had pointed out and began to climb directly over the bar.

“Gorsch,” Hilson said as he smiled at the young man again.

Gorsch nodded and took in a long, slow breath. “Right, Sir Havredar.”

Rawn laughed. “An old man who thinks he’s still a ‘Knight’, his pet goblin *and* his pet bartender. Orensling is certainly getting

an eyeful tonight.”

Murmurs passed through the patrons again, but they were quite different this time. Knights were still well respected in Orensling, even if the Kingdom no longer employed them, and bartenders are always regarded highly, as they dispense the only joy some men ever find.

Rawn waved off the dissent. He grabbed Hilson’s shoulder and spun the man to face him fully. “Get your pet monster out of here, Hilson. Now.”

“That’s Sir Havredar,” said a voice from the back of the bar and many nodding heads and whispers of agreement joined it a moment later.

Hilson turned, smiled at the room and slowly lowered his head in a bow. “Thank ye, friends.”

Rawn snatched the mug from Hilson’s hand, turned and swung at Chuba. Chuba rolled out of the stool, coming to his feet in a jog. He stopped several feet away in a crouch and looked to Hilson. The old man took another sip of his beer, that empty look on his face again.

Rawn came on quickly, shoving an empty chair from his path as he came. Chuba’s eyes scanned the room until they finally found what they sought. He tumbled into a clumsy roll to his right, coming to a stop next to a table full of young, soil-stained men. “Chuba use?” he said as he pointed to the small cudgel hanging from a loop on the belt of one of the men.

The man handed it over wordlessly with a nod. Chuba gripped it tightly and tested the weight, having no idea how it was supposed to feel. He had always seen others do that with weapons and Chuba was nothing if not a good mimic. He walked toward the center of the room where Rawn seemed to be waiting for him, a grin smeared across the man’s face.

Chuba lowered himself to a crouching position and held the cudgel in his right hand. He let out a short, loud yelp, followed by a low growl as he took a step closer to his human opponent. Chuba had never been much of a fighter, nor was he very brave, but Hilson was watching. A Knight was watching. Chuba didn’t need to know what that word really meant. He had an idea of it, and an idea is all it takes when someone you want to impress is watching.

Chuba looked past the snarling red face of the fair-skinned man waving the huge mug, into the face of his new friend. Hilson sipped from his mug and rested it on his lap. His jaws sagged and his brows slumped over his eyes. Those eyes that usually seemed kind and warm to Chuba now held something else. Something darker. The Knight's body was not tensed. His hands rested wrapped around the mug in his lap. His legs dangled slightly off the ground, swaying with the natural motion a body has when limp.

Chuba rose from his crouch and walked back toward the man who had given him the cudgel. He handed the weapon back with a nod, and walked back toward Rawn, whose face was now bound more tightly than the cloth wrapped around a sword's hilt. Chuba stopped a few feet in front of the blonde man and stood still. "Chuba no fight."

"Know when you're bested, eh beast?" Rawn said.

"Chuba no fight."

"I shouldn't be surprised. No goblin ever did anything but beg for his life," Rawn said.

"I don't seem to recall him beggin' for anything at all, Rawn," Gorch said, his arms locked together across his chest.

Rawn leaped forward, closing the few feet between himself and Chuba. The now-trembling goblin did not move.

Rawn stared at the little creature for what was later agreed upon by all in attendance as a very long time. The small man then gazed around the room to see many frowning faces, others that had turned away from him, and many whispered conversations and shaking heads.

"I'll not waste the coin to pay for Gorsch's mug on the count of you, beast," Rawn said, setting the vessel on a nearby table. He walked past Chuba, bumping into the goblin lightly as he made his way toward the tavern's door. "I never thought I'd see the day when a goblin was welcome in Orensling. Now this town has truly seen it all."

Chuba returned to his stool and sipped mead from the fresh mug Gorsch had presented him. Slowly, the conversations in the tavern began to drone together, drowning out the tense silence that had existed just a few moments before.

“Orensling truly has seen it all now, Gorsch,” Hilson said as smiled at Chuba.

“Aye, Sir Havredar. It mostly certainly has. It doesn’t seem any the worse for it either, if I might say so,” the large barman replied.

Chuba leaned in close to his friend and whispered, “Town like Chuba now?”

Hilson cocked an eyebrow. “Is that why ye did that?” he asked, jerking a thumb over his shoulder toward the door through which young Rawn had just departed.

Chuba’s lips curled slightly and he shook his head. “Chuba no like fight,” he said with a shrug.

Hilson smiled and motioned to Gorsch for another drink. “No, Chuba. They have no more love for ye than before. But they probably won’t fear ye so much anymore.” He took a long pull from his mug and licked his lips. “And that’s a fine start, lad. A fine start.”

Chuba watched Hilson for the rest of that evening. He had never seen the man smile so much in the short time he’d known him. Both of them glanced at the black and silver emblem behind the bar every so often and occasionally gave each other smiling nods.

Over the next week, Chuba came to be both in awe and bewilderment of Hilson. He spent several evenings in a chair that rocked back and forth on Hilson’s porch, listening to stories from the man’s younger days. Tales of being a Knight, ballroom dances in the King’s court, riding off to fight danger at a moment’s notice, and most especially the honor of fighting and serving his King, were what Chuba liked the best. Hilson expressed his regret at having waged war against so many goblins simply because someone told him to in his younger years. Chuba didn’t say much to this. He didn’t care much for fighting, but Hilson told stories about it in a voice that echoed through Chuba’s heart. It was important, this honor, Chuba knew. Hilson didn’t need to describe what it was. Chuba knew it. He might have been the first goblin to ever know it.

True trespassers were nearly unheard of in Orensling. More often than not, it was youngsters from the town carousing around the dusty roads and high grasses looking for a spot to drink ill-gotten spirits or have a romantic encounter with someone their family might not approve of. Hilson had a feeling that was not the case this time.

He skulked through his house, clinging to the walls as he crept. His training kept him a hair's breadth from the wall as to avoid making any scraping noise as he went. He was close now. The noise was coming from inside the next room. Whoever it was certainly had no real experience with stealth. A loud clatter informed Hilson that his weapons cabinet had been disturbed.

Hilson inched himself around the doorframe just enough to allow himself a quick glimpse into the room. "Chuba."

Chuba froze where he stood and dropped everything in his hands. Unfortunately, he happened to be holding a heavy cabinet lid, which promptly slammed back down onto his tiny hand. The goblin let out a yelp and hopped around the dark room, his left hand grasped in his right.

"Chuba, what are ye doing in here?" Hilson asked, barely able to stifle a laugh.

Chuba turned to face the man and said, "Chuba do nothing."

"Chuba, I know ye like my weapons, but do ye believe that the middle of the bleedin' night is the time to see them again?" Hilson asked, suddenly very aware that he was wearing only his thin and faded purple bed robes.

Chuba lowered his hands to his side and stood quietly.

Hilson finally noticed his own old travel bag on the floor, crammed full of food, clothes, some tools, and now a small sword. "Are ye planning on leaving, then?"

Chuba stared at him for what seemed like a season before he finally nodded.

Hilson looked out the tiny, cracked window to the east, just past the small goblin's tiny, square head. The first hints of sunrise were breaking over the horizon, glistening off the dew-covered high-grass outside his home. He looked back to his goblin friend and nodded. "Alright, then. I wish ye well, Chuba. Ye may take

whatever ye need.”

Chuba’s head shot up and his eyes fixed directly on Hilson’s.

Hilson turned and began to walk away, bouncing obviously off the door’s frame. “If ye ever find yerself this way again...” Hilson turned again and stared into Chuba’s puzzled eyes. “If ye ever find yerself this way again, stop in and see me, lad.”

“Hilson...,” Chuba said.

Hilson returned to his chambers, barely able to walk at all, let alone hear whatever it might have been that Chuba said.

The seen was all too familiar. His son had left like this too. Well, his son had left in the middle of the day, and had at least announced that he was leaving, but it had come as no less a surprise to Hilson as did this latest departure. His son had joined the new elite regiment of the King’s guard. It was the very fact that he was the son of *the* Sir Hilson Havredar that had granted him that *honor*.

His son had been well-trained, there was no doubt of that. Hilson had seen to that himself. Training means little against insurmountable odds when righteousness is not on your side. It most certainly had not been in their case. It was a foolish war fought for a foolish man.

Three months in the battlefield. That’s how long the elite regiment had lasted. Three months. His son’s sword and a letter, supposedly from the new King himself, though Hilson knew this was not the case, was all Hilson had received as acknowledgement of his son’s death in the line of duty.

“Hilson,” Chuba said from behind him.

The silver-haired man, now feeling older than ever, turned to see his goblin friend smiling.

“Hilson come with Chuba.”

Hilson stood, his mouth agape.

“Hilson come. Chuba going for Hilson, now Hilson come,” the goblin said.

The old Knight shook his head to clear away the daze. “What?”

Chuba waved for Hilson to follow him and went back to the room they had just exited. Hilson followed slowly, his eyebrows tucked tight against his brown eyes.

He entered the room to see Chuba sitting on the floor with a crude map spread out in front of him.

“See Hilson.”

Hilson looked at the drawing more closely. It seemed to trace a line to the west, past the nearby mountains, which Hilson noted were horribly misspelled in the goblin’s handwriting, toward an enormous lake some two weeks travel away.

Before Hilson could speak again, Chuba began chattering at lightning speed. The little goblin told Hilson about how, while working in a tavern in a nearby city, Chuba had heard some toughs talking about some valuable items they’d just stolen. Chuba explained how he’d overheard them say that they were headed west to a city near Lake Aoullette to ‘pong’ the stuff. Hilson pointed out that he was sure they meant that they were going ‘pawn’ the items. Chuba talked of how he had made the map by listening to bits and pieces of conversations from travelers going out into the wide world.

“But Chuba, why were you going to chase this purloined property?” Hilson said as he began unconsciously fixing the scale of the map and the landmark names with a piece of charcoal.

Chuba looked out the window of the tiny, slowly-brightening room and nodded toward the crops. “Hilson no have to farm if Hilson have stolen goodies.”

Hilson rose to his feet. “Chuba, we are going to find these valuables.”

Chuba let out a hoot of joy and began bobbing up and down frantically.

“We’re going to find these men, turn them into the authorities and return the stolen items to their owner,” Hilson said.

Chuba froze and stared at the man. “Hilson stay farmer?”

“If that is how it is to be.”

Chuba nodded and bowed his head.

“Of course,” Hilson said as a grin began to creep across his face, “if the owners of the items should see fit to reward us, then so be it.”

Chuba quickly raised his head and returned Hilson’s grin. “Hilson right. Stuff not belong to Chuba or Hilson.”

Hilson nodded. “Now, get some sleep. We set off first thing in

the morning.”

Chuba darted off toward his room but stopped abruptly when he heard Hilson’s voice.

“Chuba, why did ye wait all this time to go after these men? Ye’ve been here for weeks.”

The goblin’s head swayed back and forth lightly before he finally said, “Chuba forget. Just remember now.”

Hilson nodded with a smile. “Very well then. To bed, now.”

Hilson practically skipped into town the next day and purchased Chuba a small mace, built more for practice than fighting, some fine riding breeches made for a child, and a few scraps of metal. He bought the metal from a blacksmith in town who nearly burst with laughter, but agreed to Hilson’s request. A pair of miniature, dull bracers, a half-plate made for a goblin’s chest, which the smith initially refused to craft as it made him feel foolish, and shortened leg-guards were delivered two days later.

Chuba adored his gifts. He droned on and on for the entire day about them, thanking Hilson more times than the old man could count. Hilson insisted that it was only proper for a squire to be outfitted in such items. After the knight explained more properly what it meant to be a squire, Chuba gushed even more.

Over their four days of preparation for departure, Hilson spent a great deal of his time in town. Chuba couldn’t understand why, and was most definitely puzzled when strangers from town stopped by the farm to look around.

One day, a man younger than Hilson walked nearly every inch of the farmland, talking to Hilson endlessly. Chuba had inquired with his friend as to the reason for these visitors, and Hilson had assured him it was nothing at all. He had offered no other explanation. Chuba had never known him to answer a question that way. Hilson believed in honesty, after all. Chuba trusted his friend, though, and allowed the man his secret.

After the young man left the farm, Hilson announced that their quest would begin the next day. The two of them spent that night in quiet thought, sitting on the porch, as had become their evening

habit.

The next morning, they were off. Hilson said that given the terrain they were to cover, it would be cruel to ride horseback. They walked for what seemed like a week that first day. They covered a great measure of ground, their spirits high and their supply packs feeling as light as air. It was the perfect time of year for travel. The leaves had not quite turned, but autumn's cool breath was just beginning to blow from the sky's mouth, while summer's bright sun still shone, granting long days and a light mood.

They camped, and spent that first night telling each other stories. Hilson told more stories of his days as a Knight, defending the land he loved from neighboring threats. Chuba told stories of working for humans, mostly in taverns and inns and how occasionally he found humans that did not seem to mind having a goblin around. Most, however, did not care for his kind.

Chuba tried his best to describe the life of a goblin for Hilson, but finally conceded that he could not find the words. Hilson agreed that he had no idea what it must be like and once again lamented the time he'd spent in his youth killing goblinkin. Chuba assured him that this policy, for the most part, was probably not so bad an idea. Who better than Chuba knew what most goblins were like, after all?

Both of them agreed that orcs had no place in the world at all, however, so Hilson told more stories about slaughtering the brutes and Chuba cheered with glee every time the killing stroke was described. Chuba hated orcs, as do most creatures that are smaller than the hulking beasts. Their cruelty was legendary, and Chuba knew it firsthand.

Chuba awoke the next morning to find his worn cloak draped over him instead of his usual way of wearing it. When he asked Hilson what had happened, Hilson could provide no answers but seemed to have an unusually large grin on his face. After that, the days raced by, the two friends talking all the day long as they walked. After a week, Hilson seemed pleased with their progress and estimated they would reach the town Chuba overheard the men mention before the sun would rise thrice more. Chuba was simply pleased to be out on the road with Hilson.

The mountains had come and gone with little trouble. Hilson had known a small trail under the mountains, though not deep enough to disturb any of the truly dangerous denizens of the deep. Hilson was surprised at how apprehensive Chuba was in the tunnels. Chuba explained that while his kind often lived in a place like this, he had never felt like much of one of his own kind. Hilson could only smile and speed up the pace to emerge above ground all the more quickly again.

They made their way through an enormous valley on the far side of the mountains. The white caps of the mountains behind them stung their eyes in the morning sun. The trees were less in the grip of autumn here and the air was warmer and somehow stale in the quiet grassy area. Chuba fumbled the map out of his pack again and began to insist that they were traveling the wrong way. Hilson assured the goblin that they were indeed on track, and that the corrections to their course that the goblin suggested would take them days out of their way.

They were walking through a thin, but wide copse of trees situated near the middle of the valley when Hilson froze in mid-stride and held his hand out, motioning for Chuba to stop. Chuba sank to all-fours and craned his head, his pointed ears twitching. Hilson let out a wild scream, drew his sword with inconceivably fast reflexes and thrust forward into some tall brush. A scream erupted and Hilson jumped back, sword at the ready.

“Chuba, on your guard!” Hilson said.

Chuba crept backward slowly, clumsily pulling his mace from his belt as he went.

An orc, taller than any corn Hilson had ever grown, emerged from the brush, holding a hand over the gushing wound in his stomach. The hideous thing’s lower lip almost swallowed its compact face. One of the two tusks protruding from that twisted mouth rose to a height just above the creature’s forehead, while the other barely emerged from behind that enormous lip, apparently broken off many moons ago.

Hilson stood with his long, lean legs apart, presenting his profile to the monster as he drew a circle through the air with his blade. The almost black skin on the orc’s face tightened in a grin, reminding Hilson of a hide being stretched for tanning. The beast

let loose a series of short grunts.

“He call friend!” Chuba said, understanding the guttural language of the orc.

Hilson’s eyes went wide and he lunged forward, swinging his sword in an upward arc as he went. The enormous orc took a large step backward, bringing his long pickaxe to bear as he did. The sword’s metal screeched in protest as it skittered along the pick’s rusted surface. Hilson did not relent. He drove further into the creature’s space with a flurry of attacks. Low and outside, high and inside, straight on, Hilson tried everything he could think of. The large beast managed to turn them all away and began to laugh.

After his sixth failed attempt, Hilson groaned and took a step back, lowering his sword. He stared at the orc for a long moment before turning to face Chuba. “Leave Chuba.”

Chuba returned his friend’s gaze and wanted nothing more than to do just that, but the little goblin shook his head and leaped to his feet. He circled the orc until he came to stand to the beast’s left, while Hilson was still on its right. Hilson shrieked his command again.

The orc seized the opportunity and came toward Hilson, drawing his weapon first up and then down in a wide arc toward the man’s head. Hilson grinned and stepped to his left, easily avoiding the attack. The orc, realizing its peril halfway through the swing, made a failed attempt to change directions. Hilson drew his sword to overtop his left shoulder and, with just his right hand, cut hard through the air, biting into the orc’s side. Hilson danced away a few feet and dove back in for small stabs to the creature’s neck and shoulder, still openly exposed. The orc’s initial momentum was never disturbed. It crashed forward, its oversized tusk throwing dirt high into the air as it dug into the ground.

Hilson started to turn when he heard Chuba scream, but it was too late. The old Knight looked down to see the wide edge of a dull halberd bursting from his own chest. His eyes locked with Chuba’s, who was soiling himself even as he stood there. Hilson’s torso seemed to collapse in on itself as the halberd was torn free. He turned to face a rather short orc whose eyes held a great deal more spark than its friend’s. The newcomer smiled a toothy smile and barked what seemed to be a friendly hello.

Hilson nodded and sank to his knees. He began loosening the straps on his plate mail and blowing the long gray strands of hair from his face.

Chuba's eyes narrowed and he let out a shriek so high-pitched that both the orc assailant and Hilson winced. The diminutive goblin lunged toward the bulky orc with his mace held out in front of him. The mace's head poked into the orc's thigh and promptly flew from Chuba's trembling hand. The orc's skin, more green than that of his recently departed companion, flushed to a lighter shade for a moment under the mace's impact. The orc glanced down and let out a roar of laughter.

"Chuba, flee!" Hilson coughed as he pulled his armor free of his body.

Chuba shook his head violently and dove into an awkward tumble toward his mace. His orc opponent made no move at all to stop him. Chuba grasped the mace and came to his feet again. He unleashed a furious assault on the orc's left knee. After four strikes, the orc winced and kicked out toward the goblin.

Hilson grabbed Chuba's tattered cape, which the goblin had insisted on keeping, and yanked his small friend out of range of the attack. At the same time, the Knight drove his own weapon deep into the orc's hip with a surprising amount of force. The beast fell back, gripping his new wound and howling in pain.

Chuba wrenched himself free of Hilson's grasp and dove onto the fallen orc. His mace rose and fell again and again, caving the brute's face in. He continued to pound for many long moments, his panting breath spraying the pouring sweat from his face into the wind.

A long moment passed after Chuba ceased his attack. He turned to see Hilson lying on the ground.

"I've never seen anyone fight like that, Chuba," the old Knight whispered. "Passion."

Chuba rushed to Hilson's side, coming to a skidding stop on his knees in the dirt.

"Thank ye, son. Thanks to ye for all I might be worth."

Chuba shook his head and ran his fingers through Hilson's silver mane.

"It's what I've wanted for these past six years, lad."

“Hilson want die?”

“No,” Hilson said slowly. “But I did want to live again. Ye gave me that, son. Ye and this cockamamie goose chase of yours got me on the road again. There’s no better place for people like us, Chuba. No better place anywhere. Certainly no damnable farm.”

Chuba nodded as he sniffled. He knew Hilson would have figured out his deception by now. “Hilson know all along?”

“Aye, and may any gods ye love praise ye for it.”

Chuba managed a weak smile and wiped away the tears blossoming in his eyes. “Hilson sold farm, Chuba know. Hilson want go home anyway?”

Hilson stared at the goblin and shook his head. “Aye, I should have known that you’d have figured it out, lad.” The man marveled at the goblin’s stoicism, knowing full well that Chuba would gladly lug his body back to Orensling should he only ask it. “No. Here will be fine, lad. This suits me fine.”

Chuba nodded again and started to speak, but found that nothing came out.

“Chuba, as my only heir,” Hilson said with a wince as his body convulsed, “ye are now responsible for carrying on my name.”

Chuba furrowed his brow and shook his head. “Chuba?”

“Aye. Come here,” Hilson said, motioning for Chuba to kneel closer to him.

He raised his thin, trembling arm and brought his sword down on Chuba’s left shoulder. “Do you swear to uphold the values you have demonstrated before me?”

Chuba nodded, genuinely understanding what the words meant. It might have been the first time that had ever happened to him with a sentence of more than five words. He knew them, though. He felt them.

“That’s all a Knight is, son. A man, or a goblin,” Hilson said with a smile before loosing a blood-letting cough. “A man or a goblin, who stands naked against the world with only his honor and his values as a shield. Yer shield is stronger and better forged than many men I’ve seen. Grasp the end of my sword, Chuba.”

Chuba did so, not flinching at all as the impossibly sharp

metal sliced into his skin.

“By the grace of all that is kind and good in the world, I dub thee Sir Chuba, defender of any realm ye stand in.”

Chuba choked back the pain in his throat and gripped the blade even more tightly, drawing more blood.

“I’ve left ye a gift, Chuba. It’s not as wonderful as the gift ye’ve just given me, but I hope it suits ye.”

Chuba sat for a long time over his Hilson’s body, still clutching the man’s sword. That evening he buried his father in a shallow grave, for that’s how Chuba would forever know the man now. He scrawled on Hilson’s breastplate with the man’s sword, taking pains to insure that he had the words correct. It read: “Sir Hilson. Chuba father.” He placed the plate at the head of the piled earth for all to read.

That night Chuba slept atop the mound of dirt under which his father now rested. He dreamed of gleaming armor and magnificent battles. He hadn’t yet noticed the addition to his tattered cloak. The crude lettering once read: ‘Chuba Free’. Now, in finer letters and a little cleaner than it had once been, it read: ‘Sir Chuba Free’.