



PROLOGUE

A VERY LONG TIME AGO, HUMANS AND FAIRIES and elves and dolphins and all of the other intelligent beings of the world got sick of one another—which was understandable, as intelligent beings were all pretty much rubbish in those days. After much arguing, they decided to split up the world and build a sort of magical wall between the two halves. On the human side of the barrier, life would be governed by logic and reason and the laws of nature. It would be an honest world of soil and struggle. The other side would be ruled by forces more ancient than any earthly science, a world of magic and madness and raw potential. Humans called their side the Earth, and

magical beings called their side the Annwyn (all except for the gnomes, who called it Pippin-Gilliewhipple—which is one of many reasons that, to this day, nobody from either side much cares for gnomes).

For many centuries, the wall stood—a sort of veil between two worlds, invisible but everywhere. Neither side could see or touch the other, and in time many creatures forgot there was another world at all. This remained the state of things until rogue groups brought their simmering strife to an unruly boil and a new war broke out. As it turned out, intelligent beings were still fairly rubbish if not properly supervised. The resulting battle blasted a great, gaping hole right through the invisible barrier.

When the dust had settled, some felt the hole in the wall should be patched back up, and others felt the barrier should come down entirely. In all the hubbub, nobody noticed as the thing that had been *inside* the wall—the thing that may have been the very *soul* of the wall—escaped. Nobody was watching as the thing that had spent countless centuries listening at the cracks and growing hungrier and hungrier slipped past the rubble and across the bloody battlefield. Nobody saw it slide quietly into the forest.

The Thing clutched at shadows as it moved between the trees, drawing the darkness around itself like a riding cloak. It had never known sunlight, or birdsong, or

honey-sweet breezes, or even the sound of its own name. If the Thing even had ever had a name, it had never had anyone to speak it.

The Thing whipped past mossy boulders, through towering trees, and over the muggy, murky Oddmire. When it reached the very heart of the Wild Wood, it finally slowed and came to rest. The trees grew more densely there, and the air was still. Even the sound of the birds died away. The shadows here were thick and heavy, and the Thing gathered them up, greedily.

The Thing knew shadows. In that sunless, starless place between worlds, there had been shadows so absolute they had no form. The Thing's whole world had been a shadow—its whole life had been one great shadow, and within it, the Thing had felt impossibly small. But the shadows in this new place were different. They would do as it bid them. They were powerful, those shadows of stones and boulders and tall pine trees, and the pieces torn from them felt comfortable as they knit together across the Thing's back. The Thing felt strong. Beneath its swelling cloak of darkness, the Thing began to take on new shapes. Bigger shapes. Terrible shapes. Still, there was one shadow that caught the Thing like a thorn: its own. The creature's meager slip of a shadow followed it, clung to it, taunted it with its own true, trifling form.

The creature plunged its talons into the forest floor, and for a time, the only sound was the scratching of unseen claws digging into the soil. When the hole was deep enough, the Thing turned its talons in on itself. It tore and it ripped until finally, reverently, it lowered its own severed shadow into the cold earth and buried the humble scrap beneath the dirt. All around it, pools of darkness blossomed as if the entire forest floor were a fresh, clean napkin laid over a seeping ink stain.

The darkness grew.

The Thing drew itself up to its full height, and then it drew itself up a little higher, and higher still. Countless stolen shadows rippled along its cloak like waves of grain shimmering in a breeze. The Thing would be whatever it pleased now. It was never going back.

The darkness spreading across the forest floor solidified into angry coils and knots as it grew. Wicked thorns burst from its surface. For just a moment, there was silence and the forest was still. And then the darkness began to creep.



ONE

THE TOWN OF ENDSBOROUGH WAS A QUIANT community teetering on the edge of what could be only generously termed civilization. A dense forest known by the locals as the Wild Wood curled around the town the way a Great Dane might curl around a terrier puppy. A single, winding road was all that connected the people of Endsborough to the rest of the world. Two days' ride on a sturdy horse would take travelers past Cobb's Outpost and to the crowded city of Glanville, where modernity was all the rage. Gas lamps were on their way out in Glanville, and fancy electric streetlights were on their way in. Quiet Endsborough, meanwhile, had not

yet gotten around to gas. Its citizens had adopted the practical habit of going to sleep when the sun went down—and when the sun rose, they rose with it. There was a straightforward simplicity to Endsborough.

The town boasted a lumber mill and a coal mine. It had modest apple orchards and more cows than it really needed, if it was being honest. In its middle sat a brick building that served as the schoolhouse on weekdays, the church on Sundays, and the meeting hall on Saturdays. It was a no-nonsense sort of town that heard about notions like technology and progress and decided that they sounded exhausting.

Everybody knew the wood was home to monsters: towering giants and trolls and goblins who kidnapped sweet, dimpled babies in the dead of night, stealing them away into the forest forever. Daring adventures awaited any hero brave enough to cross that tree line and march into the unknown. Which was why the people of Endsborough did not. Endsborough was simply not the sort of town that went looking for trouble. Trouble, however, found its own way to Endsborough.

Trouble crept silently out of the Wild Wood one warm summer night, holding its breath as it tiptoed toward a cottage on the edge of town. Trouble listened outside the back window, waiting patiently until everyone inside was asleep.

And then, when it was quite certain it would not be spotted, trouble made its move.



Kull tiptoed along the back wall, holding his precious bundle close to his chest as he hurried from shadow to shadow. He meant well—mostly—at least by goblin standards. His pointed ears perked up at every sound, and his jagged teeth ground nervously against one another.

It wasn't treason, what he was doing. It was tradition. And it was necessary. True, the goblin chief had commanded that the human world was now strictly off-limits, and yes, there had been talk of terrible shame and torture, and something about entrails, for any member of the goblin horde who trespassed into the world of men—but the quiet, dark room into which Kull crept that night did not belong to a *man*, did it? A *man* could hardly fit in the wee cradle or appreciate the colorful rattle and the fluffy stuffed lamb, could he?

Kull was going to steal that baby. Stealing babies was what goblins did. Or it was what they ought to do. It was certainly what they *used* to do.

Kull grunted as he pulled himself up to the open window with one hand, the bundle still cradled tight in the other. Perhaps *not* stealing babies was what had gotten the horde into its current sad state of affairs. Chief Nudd was

too soft. He was too modern-minded. He was too weak. Yes, he threatened to boil their noses and braid their toes from time to time, but he so rarely followed through on those threats anymore. Too much time spent colluding with humans, that was the problem. Not enough time spent stealing babies.

Kull slipped down from the window to the floorboards as quietly as he could. The air in the room smelled of soap and talcum powder.

The chief's empathetic quirks had been tolerable while the horde was thriving, but things were different now. Kull felt it. The chief felt it. Every goblin in the horde felt it. Slowly but steadily, magic was leaving the Wild Wood. Slowly but steadily, the horde was dying. It was one thing to sit idly by when there was nothing to be done about it, but it was something else entirely to sit idly by when the solution was right there in their hands.

The cloth bundle shifted against Kull's grip, and he felt tiny, soft fingers wrap around his thumb. He glanced down at the bundle in his arms. His throat felt dry. The changeling was the answer.

A changeling was more than just a goblin who could transform to look like a human. A changeling was the living embodiment of goblin magic. It was a symbol of power and potential. It was hope. It was no coincidence that the

changeling had been born just when things appeared most dire. Chief Nudd had failed them, but out of his failure, the one shining light was this baby.

The horde had not produced a changeling—a real changeling, not just an ordinary goblin in a wig and a dress—since the era of the Manky Basilisk. Nudd’s father had still been chief back then. The old chief would never have questioned what to do when a changeling was born into the horde. He had been a goblin’s goblin, steeped in the Old Ways. Now that he was gone, somebody had to see that the Old Ways did not go forgotten.

Admittedly, if Kull was being truthful, he only half remembered the Old Ways himself. Many of them he had never learned in the first place, but he would bleed for the bits he did remember—well, someone would bleed, anyway—and Chief Nudd and all the rest of them would thank him when it was done. Until then, he was on his own. If Kull hoped to see the ancient traditions revived, he would have to sort out the details by himself, and he would have to sort them out quickly.

The squishy pink baby in the crib ahead of him was already beginning to stir. Kull hoped to whisk the little human back into the Wild Wood before it started crying, leaving the changeling in its stead. Then there would be the customary exchange with the fair folk—Kull would have

to dig out the ancient contracts to find the details on that. He couldn't remember exactly how it all worked—but soon enough the human baby would be on the other side of the veil and magic would return to this one. How long should the changeling remain with the humans? It had a three in it, Kull thought. Or maybe a seven? It was important, he remembered that much. Pesky details about numbers and ceremonies and proper procedures could wait until after he had stolen the child and returned home in glory.

It wasn't about abducting children, Kull reminded himself, or about the merry havoc the little changeling would wreak in its place. It was about the good of the horde. It was about tradition. Goblinkind needed magic. Just a little. Just enough. They needed to tap into the ancient rituals. They needed the Old Ways. They needed that baby.

Kull clambered up into the bassinet with his bundle and set the squirming changeling down gently in the soft bedding. It was the rarest of their kind in a generation, and Kull would see it fulfill its purpose before Nudd could geld its beautiful mischief. In his hands it had looked at least mostly goblin, albeit a goblin with skin like smoke and shadows, but now it rippled and wavered like a living mirage. Its skin was speckled with stars and peeling like old wallpaper, and then it was the color of the cherrywood crib and as woolly as the child's blanket.

Kull had been nervous that the transformation would not work without the proper words, but now he grinned with all his jagged teeth to see the thing's magical instincts taking over.

Somewhere inside the house, a floorboard creaked. Kull froze, all of his senses instantly trained on the door to the hallway. He should have latched it. It hung ajar, and now soft footfalls were approaching. A flicker of shadow. Kull's breath caught in his throat and his eyes went wide.

The door shuddered inward and a fat black cat sauntered in. It glanced up at Kull, who stood motionless inside the bassinet, and then it sat down on the carpet to watch, flicking its tail and looking unimpressed.

Kull breathed. It was fine. The full-grown humans were still asleep. He turned back around to bear witness to the glorious miracle of his proud and ancient culture. Two button-nosed babies with pudgy pink cheeks blinked back at him.

It was done! The changeling had performed beyond Kull's wildest imagination; the impersonation was exact! Kull had only to pluck the helpless infant from the safety of its bed and secrete it away into the Deep Dark, leaving the doppelgänger in its place. First one child smacked its tiny lips and then the other. The other rubbed its cheek and then the first.

Kull hesitated. He peered at the squishy little face closest to him. He peered at the other face. Which was it? He nudged the first child with a bony knuckle. As one, the babies began to cry. Kull cringed.

Up the hall, a door clicked open, and a woman's tired voice echoed down the corridor. "He's probably just hungry. You sleep. I'll put him back to bed."

Kull panicked. He took the closest child into his shaking hands, and then dropped it and wrapped his fingers around the farthest instead. The babies wailed and kicked their chubby legs. Kull's chest was pounding. Which one was it?

He hopped from one foot to the other. The sound of footsteps drew nearer. Which one? Which one? He glanced from the door to the children to the door to the children to . . .

The door opened with a mewl like a kitten. "Hush, sweetie. Mama's here," Mrs. Burton cooed blearily. The curtain flapped in the cool night breeze as she crossed to the crib. Mrs. Burton froze. Mrs. Burton stared.

Kull had already burst through the underbrush and into the Wild Wood when the lamps flickered on in the house behind him. His feet were racing, his heart was thudding, his head was full, and his hands were empty.