

MULROX

and the Malcognitos



Kerelyn Smith



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Great-aunts do not make good houseguests. Neither do ogres. Unfortunately for Mulrox, Great-Aunt Griselda was both.

“Mulrox!” The walls of his hut rattled. “Get in here!”

“I’d rather not,” Mulrox said under his breath.

“Grandnephew!”

Mulrox looked miserably at the map-adorned wall that separated him from his beastly great-aunt and then back at his blackboard. There, his latest poem, painstakingly scrawled out in his jagged handwriting, was almost complete. He had been working on this one for the better part of a month. Only the final couplet was left. If he stayed quiet, she might think he’d gone and he could spend a little longer on—

“MULROX!”

A blur of motion from the corner of the room made Mulrox look up in time to see his pet toad tumble from the top of her perch amidst a landslide of odds and ends and a cloud of chalk dust.

“Geraldine!” Mulrox closed the distance between them in a few hurried steps, clearing thimbles and hand drills and drying nuts from his path. “Are you okay?”

The toad glowered at him.

"Of course you are. My mistake," Mulrox said, peering around the step stool at her. "You look..."

Normally Geraldine was a dignified animal: large for a black toad, her head came up to his ankle. Down her back ran a single yellow stripe with a series of jagged lines radiating from it. Now, however, a fine white powder covered every inch of the toad. If it weren't for her golden eyes, which were giving him a particularly odious glare, she could have been mistaken for a garden figurine. "You look statuesque," he finished.

She swiped at him with her long, pink tongue and Mulrox chuckled. He brushed the dust from her back and then scooped her up into his arms.

She softened but then turned toward the offending noises—his old bedroom.

"She'll go back to Raggok soon, I'm sure of it. Griselda hates it here—why would she stay?"

The map on the far wall shuddered again, and the crunching moan of splintering wood echoed through his hut.

Geraldine raised an eye ridge.

"Alright, I'll tell her," Mulrox said. He set Geraldine on her perch. "She has to go." He took a deep breath and made his way to his old bedroom, which was now serving as his great-aunt's recovery room.

GREAT-AUNT GRISELDA LAY SPRAWLED out on the covers of Mulrox's four-poster bed, dressed in a nightgown that must have been several centuries old. The ridiculous lace collar stretched out in a cone around her neck, making her look like an unappetizing ice cream cone. The gown was too short, and her arms and legs poked out of the fabric, revealing dark blue skin as tough and weathered as corrugated metal. Two thick planks of wood—one in front, one in back—anchored her fractured hip

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bones in place. Next to her were the splintered remains of his side table.

“Let’s have it then.” She held out her immense blue hand and opened and closed it expectantly.

Mulrox looked around him.

“The tooth file.” She pointed to the dresser, on top of which sat a metal file encrusted in flakes of old food and saliva.

Mulrox held the file out to her.

“Here I am, cooped up in this horrible little room,” she said. Mulrox stared at the hand-carved scene that ran along his bed frame, full of toads and squirrels and flowers. He glanced at the window seat in the far corner and the thick, mossy rug at the base of the bed. He tried to swallow down the ridiculous feeling of homesickness that clawed at his throat. She snatched the file from him and smacked the bed with it. “And now my teeth have gone dull. They barely tore through that old leather book you had lying about.”

His stomach dropped. Shreds of leather and paper that had once been one of his prized volumes of Vrokta’s poetry covered his bed. It hadn’t been lying about; it had been in a place of honor on his desk.

“Perfect outside, perfect inside, I always say. Maybe if you spent a little less time in here with your books and more time working on your smashing arm, you’d look more like a proper ogre and less like an overripe tomato.”

Mulrox’s ears burned, and he knew he was turning that particular shade of maroon she was referring to.

“There’s no point changing colors on me.” Griselda scoffed and began to saw at her lower canine teeth. “It’s the truth. Accept it.”

Mulrox couldn’t help it. He knew he was only turning a darker shade. He was small—too small—and scrawny. Not at all the build an ogre should be.

Griselda sighed. “It’s no surprise. Grendel knows your side of

the family has always been trouble—what with your puny necks and wild ideas, no underbites to speak of—just look at what's happened..."

Mulrox wanted to sink into the floor.

"I'll never understand why your father sold off your land."

"For me." The words came out so soft he wasn't sure if he had spoken out loud.

"For you? You should have left Ulgorprog altogether! Living in this hut, surrounded by those ridiculous flowers, and right on the border of the Woods Mercurial."

"It's not so bad," Mulrox said, trying not to look at her as bits of spittle and tooth sprayed the sheets. "You just stay out of the woods and it mostly leaves you alone."

"I'll be the judge of that. My hip is no better, thank you for asking. Apparently for a quattrocentenarian, my recovery is miraculous. Rubbish. How long have I been here? A week? Two weeks? And I'm still strapped into this monstrosity."

It had been four days since she had appeared on his doorstep in the middle of the night with a bruised eye, a broken hip, and a mountain of suitcases. It felt like years.

She leered at her hip. "They told me no more roofs—can you believe that?"

It seemed like sound-enough advice to him. According to town gossip, it had been stomping through a roof and landing on a stone fireplace that had put Griselda in this state.

"Do they think roofs cave in on their own? Bad omen is what it was. Blasted unlucky new moon. I told them it was no night for it. No moon. No raiding. Dark as death, it was. I've been crushing roofs with Debtor's Doom for four centuries with no incident. No more roofs!" She shook her head. "Is that the rubbish they've been teaching you in the Raid Brigade?"

"No, nothing's changed." Nothing in Ulgorprog ever did. "It's still the same: drums, formations, smashing."

She regarded him for a moment. "If you're anything to go

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by, they aren't doing a proper job. I'll have to speak to Groxor. Do you think the king pays us to not get our hands dirty? No. We are to instill fear in those dirty, little tax evaders." She took the file out of her mouth and began to wave it about. "A few broken windows will not cut it!" she spluttered. "The terms are very clear. Destroy everything but their puny people. Every! Thing!" She had to catch her breath.

It was as good a time as any.

"You know Great-Aunt I... I was thinking." He was rushing through his words. *Slow down*, he told himself. He stared at the lines and whorls in the floorboards and continued. "If you would be more comfortable, we could always arrange for you to go home."

Silence. Many moments passed before he dared to look up.

"Home." Griselda was smiling. Mulrox tried not to wince. "It's an intriguing concept. I have a few more inquiries to make, but yes, we will discuss home. Let's say tomorrow. At the Proggrog. Is that soon enough for you?"

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He nodded. "I'll see you at the Slobber and Snore."

"Again?! That dump?"

"It's held there every week."

"That place is a disgrace."

Mulrox loved the Slobber and Snore. He had practically grown up in that inn: hidden behind the bar, or crouched with his arms threaded through the slats of the stairway, or darting from one lopsided table to the next as he shadowed Trolzor, the innkeeper. Mulrox didn't have many friends, but Trolzor had always looked out for him, even when the rest of the town had turned their backs. And the Proggrog was one of the few parts of being an ogre that Mulrox understood. Every week they gathered to share food, stories, and Svenn's music. Mulrox's mouth watered just thinking about the bone-meal biscuits dripping with honey butter. There was even the occasional poetry reading,

as long as the poem was properly bellicose and grim and the reader did not get carried away with emotion. He didn't love all the droning on about tradition, but he tried to nod along and enjoy being a part of the group for once. He didn't expect Griselda to understand any of that.

"It's the only place big enough," Mulrox offered.

"Miserable, little town. Without even a proper gathering hall. No choice of bean-sprout wine to speak of. And that six-fingered slug, what does he think he's playing at?"

"Svenn."

"All that music—it's not ogreian. 'Dishonesty will not be tolerated.'" She was quoting from the old laws. Not known for their wits, the elders had had a natural fear of anything pretending to be what it was not. Most ogres ignored the laws banning music, storytelling, and art, but a few stalwarts like Griselda clung to the spirit of them. "What's a giant slug doing in a town full of ogres? It's suspicious. He has far too many fingers."

"Svenn is..."

Svenn had lived in the Slobber and Snore for as long as Mulrox could remember. Ogres did not like outsiders; however, Svenn was not only the best musician in town but quite possibly the best in all of Veralby. His fingers flew over the strings of his theorbo as though they were made for it. No one knew why the slug lived in Ulgorprog, but as long as he continued to play, they didn't much care. To Mulrox, Svenn was a true artist, a kindred spirit, and Mulrox watched him from afar with admiration and longing.

"Svenn..."

Griselda raised an eyebrow and Mulrox felt that horrible color returning. He looked at the floor.

"As I thought," Griselda said. "Rinse this off on your way out." Griselda chucked the file at his head.

He put a hand up to catch it, but it clattered to the ground,

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spattering him with white and green fragments. The Proggrog was tomorrow. He picked up the file with two fingers. It was slick with saliva. *You can make it to tomorrow.*

“And try to keep it down out there. Grendel knows what you are playing at, but I need my rest.”

Geraldine was waiting for him. She had placed herself in his path so that when he rounded the corner into the living room, he had to stop short to avoid running her over. She gave him a quizzical croak.

“Yes,” Mulrox said. “And I think it worked! We will talk tomorrow. We’re going to get our house back!”

The toad made a happy chirp and began to hop about the living room, kicking up chalk dust as she went. There was so much scattered dust that it looked like she was leaping in and out of a cloud.

He hadn’t realized how dreadful the mess was. Mulrox loved words, he loved the sound of them as they rolled about in his mouth, words like *excruciating*, *blubbering*, *particulate*. Sharp words like *masticate*, round ones like *omnibus*, rich ones like *candelabra*, and gaseous ones like *flabbergasted*. He loved the shape of them, the peaks and valleys, the dark swarm of letters, the space and promise of a line break.

But despite his passion and effort, Mulrox knew he was not a real poet. He had never been very good, but lately it seemed he had had nothing but bad luck. Everything he wrote, every word, was terrible. Each misstep tormented him. If he wanted to be

like Vrokta, there was no room for sagging half-baked thoughts. Vrokta was the self-proclaimed enemy of mediocrity. And so Mulrox was too, accepting nothing less than perfection in every sound and syllable. So when the words came out lazy and twisted, Mulrox obliterated them, ripping out pages from his notebook or dashing them from his blackboard. The floor was littered with scraps of paper, and chalk dust coated every surface, the shelves, the books, even Geraldine with the dusty remains of his terrible ideas.

Mulrox gathered an armload of balled-up papers and tossed them into the fireplace. The fire leapt and cackled at its good fortune. The flames licked the spiked edges of the grate as though ready to erupt from the mouth of the dragon carved into the fireplace frame.

Mulrox put his hand against one of the dragon's jeweled eyes and sighed. He tried to call to mind the words of Vrokta's poem for inspiration.

*When I strive for perfection,
I see my reflection
In hundreds of myriad ways.
If I change my objective
to this new perspective,
the ideal will point the way.*

Mulrox's ideas didn't seem to care what he strived for; there was no insight, no light, just mountains of terrible ideas. At this point he'd do anything for a little guidance. "I'm more eraser than writer."

Geraldine materialized above the swirling mass of chalk dust and glared at him before she dropped below the surface. She leapt again and this time clicked her heals together midair.

Mulrox laughed.

"Come on, you audacious amphibian."

She leapt again, rolling over once in the air before landing.

“You tilting tadpole.” She went higher. “You twinkling toad. Let’s get you a snack.”

Geraldine landed with a splat at the mention of food and followed Mulrox to the pantry. He leaned on the brick behind the stove, and they waited as the floorboards groaned open and the worm bin cranked up foot by foot to the kitchen from far beneath the house. He plunged his hand into the dirt and pulled out a fistful of the wriggling creatures.

“I’ll never understand why you like these.” He kicked the trapdoor closed and then tossed the worms toward her. Geraldine didn’t wait for them to land but shot out her pink tongue and snatched them into her mouth.

In one swift movement, the toad swallowed the entire mass of worms. She closed her eyes and drew back the corners of her mouth until her grin spread to her ears. She stayed like that for a few seconds before her eyes flew open and she bounded back to the living room.

She jerked her head at the blackboard.

“Now?” Mulrox groaned. “But I have training tomorrow.”

Geraldine turned and hopped up the series of ascending toadstools to her viewing platform next to the blackboard.

Mulrox hesitated. He wanted to. He loved the feel of the chalk in his hand, the calm peace that came from concentrating. But Groxor had warned Mulrox a million times about being late, and when he stayed up, his eyes could barely hold themselves open during the day.

The toad growled.

“Have I mentioned how pushy you are?”

Geraldine smiled.

He made his way to the board, examining the poem he had been working on for the last few weeks. It was slow going. He tried to write from inspiration like he had read about, but it seemed his inspiration was broken because everything he came up with ended up wrong. But Geraldine wanted him to try.

Mulrox picked up his chalk.

He stood there for several moments, thinking.

The wall rumbled with a deep, grumbling snore—Griselda must have fallen asleep. Good. It was one less thing for him to worry about.

He turned back to the board and scribbled out the words.

*"Like a tree with frog legs, he grasped the sky.
His smashing fists could never lie."*

It... It was—

TERRIBLE.

Mulrox seized the old mop head he used as an eraser and dashed the words from the blackboard, kicking up a new cloud of dust.

The last lines had to be perfect. You couldn't end a poem of heroic smashing with a weak flail of words. It had to resound with the strength of Ikarax the Insidious, who had single-handedly sunk a warship with only his bare fists. It had to grab the listeners and shake them until their teeth rattled. More vicious, he told himself.

He tried again.

*With eyes like eels and rocklike skin,
He crushed them all—his might did win.*

He considered. It had the finality and weight he was looking for, the bone-crushing tone the poem needed, but as he tried to picture the victorious ogres, all he saw was a bumpy, wriggling mess. This was no good either.

He grabbed the mop and demolished the lines, littering the room with another cloud of dust.

Mulrox pressed his palms into his face. Why couldn't he be good at this one thing? Mulrox tried to think of what Vrokta would do. How would he end this battle-worn poem? Not with

victory. Mulrox was approaching it wrong. A truly gruesome poem always ended one way.

He turned back to his board, an idea racing through his head. Mulrox copied out the words, smiling to himself at the meter that matched his racing heart. This was it; he knew it. He had finished it.

His eyes sped down the poem verse after verse until he reached the end.

*To spare you now would be remiss,
So I seal your death with a kiss!*

His heart stopped as he realized what he'd done. A kiss... An ogre writing poetry about kisses, even death kisses, was simply unforgivable.

Mulrox snatched the mophead from the floor. The whole thing was tainted. Kisses. It might as well have been a love poem. If anyone ever saw this—he slammed the blackboard. The board tilted and then keeled over, crashing to the ground.

There was a snort, then Griselda grunted through the walls.
“What was that!?”

Terrible.

Griselda would tear him limb from limb if she saw this. Poetry of any kind disgusted the old ogre, but this... He expected to hear her storming over to him any second. He attacked the board, banging it with the mop.

Horrible.

He dashed every stroke from the board's surface.

“Gather the generals!” Griselda bellowed. “We attack the wall at midnight!” Another garbled noise escaped her and then faded into the droning din of her snores.

His chest heaved. She was still asleep. It was lucky his great-aunt dreamed of nothing but smashing. He could bring down the hut around her, and she wouldn't know the difference.

Mulrox closed his eyes and, as he always did when things got

too intense, tried to picture the swaying gray waters of the sea, the build and ebb, the crash and swell. He held the image until his fists stopped shaking and his heart slowed.

Mulrox opened his eyes and looked into the night, letting his thoughts drift into the darkness. Something caught his eye, moving outside his window.

The night was dark—there was only a hint of a moon—but a dark shape lit up by a bobbing halo of small blue lights crept outside. Mulrox leaned toward the window.

He immediately wished he hadn't. It was his neighbor, the one responsible for the grotesque garden. Though Mulrox was far from popular, his neighbor Yahgurkin, with her wild spray of springlike hair and even wilder ideas, was the laughingstock of Ulgorprog. And as if determined to prove her insanity, here she was outside his window in the middle of the night, wearing a necklace of glowing mushrooms and heading toward the Woods Mercurial.

Normal ogres didn't go there. His parents had read him stories about the things that happened to ogres who set foot beneath those trees. There were too many vengeful princes, boot-stealing villagers, and mystic rodents. You might even run into a lost princess, and woe to the ogre who encountered one of those. No, the ogres stayed out of the Woods Mercurial. This was a tradition Mulrox was more than happy to follow.

Geraldine thumped her viewing platform.

"Yes, it's her," Mulrox said. Those two had developed an inexplicable bond. He didn't know how it started, but he wished Yahgurkin would mind her own business. "She'll get herself turned into a squidnaut or worse."

Geraldine growled.

"It's true," Mulrox protested.

Yahgurkin must have felt them talking about her because she turned toward the hut and gave a big, friendly wave before turning back and skipping down the hill. Mulrox watched as the bouncing blue lights disappeared in the distance.

I might be weird, Mulrox thought, *but at least I'm not her.*

He turned back to Geraldine.

“We'll try again tomorrow,” Mulrox said. “Come on.”

Mulrox set down his chalk, and Geraldine hopped off her platform and down the hall toward the spare room. Mulrox straightened his stack of notebooks, dusted off his hands, and then leaned over the row of beeswax candles. He stopped midbreath.

Something was moving.

Mulrox scanned the room. Nothing unusual, just the worn-out furniture, stacks of books and notebooks, and layer upon layer of dust. Wait. There it was again. Mulrox straightened and crept back toward his blackboard, where he thought he had seen something. He held perfectly still as he watched.

Nothing.

But then, over in the corner, something. It was—dust. The draft from the door had stirred the chalk dust into a sad, little cloud. *All my broken terrible ideas,* Mulrox thought and sighed. No matter how hard he tried, he never escaped them.

MULROX LAY STRETCHED out on the guest bed, staring up at the mobile his mother had carved for him. He watched as the wooden figurines spun in slow circles—a sheep chased by a funny-looking bird that his mother had called a cedar waxwing. You knew a waxwing by the angled swoop around the eyes, the ridiculous tufts of feathers that stood almost upright on its head, and the little dots of red on its wingtips, like pools of spilled wax. His mother had made each one exactly like the drawings.

There was a croak from Geraldine.

“What's that?” Mulrox asked sleepily.

She was pushing a sheet of paper toward him. Mulrox took it from under her feet and groaned. “No, it's a good thing I didn't enter. Not with a poem like that. They'd laugh me off the stage.”

It was the flyer for the Beatific Behemoth, a talent competition. Flyers had gone up months ago, but now it was only a week away. The competition was being held in each ogre village in celebration of the great ogreian poet Vrokta. Winners from each town would perform at Vrokta's six-hundredth birthday party in front of the poet himself. Mulrox ran his fingers over the lettering and sighed.

He pushed the flyer away and pulled his newest notebook out of his pocket. "We stick to our private poetry readings."

The toad rolled her eyes.

Trolzor, the barkeep, had given Mulrox the notebook as a surprise a few months ago. The tiny book was wrapped in purple fabric and, on the front, was a toad outlined in gold. It was so lovely he hesitated each time before writing in it, afraid to screw it up with his messy ideas. He couldn't help but thumb through it, watching the blank pages fly by. Empty of good ideas —like him.

Mulrox rolled over onto his knees. Behind the guest bed hung a giant tapestry of a unicorn trapped inside a corral. It had hung there for so long, Mulrox hardly thought about it, but tonight the captured beast fit his mood.

"I get it," he whispered to the unicorn and lifted the corner of the tapestry, revealing a small cubbyhole. There were a dozen notebooks stacked up in there, pens, scraps of paper, a few drawings and odds and ends. A rock, a feather, anything that had struck his fancy. Mulrox set the purple notebook on top of the stack and dropped the fabric back over it silently thanking his parents for supplying so many hiding places. The house was filled with them. It was one benefit to living in a house your parents had made for themselves. There were drawbacks too, things done not quite right, like his basement, which currently sat under three feet of water. But his parents' forethought had allowed him to snatch his treasures from their old spot in his room and deposit them safely in their new home. He couldn't take any chances of Griselda finding them.

Mulrox rolled back around onto his bed and took one last look at the flyer. He had no business entering. He could barely walk down the road without falling on his face—there was no chance he would ever win a competition of any kind. But that didn't stop him from wishing. He worried too. He had grown accustomed to being alone. But Geraldine. He looked over at the toad, whose head was so heavy it was swaying from side to side, her eyelids drooping up and down again as she struggled to stay awake. He didn't want her to be lonely.

"Good night, Geraldine," Mulrox said. He leaned over to turn off the light. "Maybe tomorrow you'll get to see Yahgurkin."

Geraldine gurgled and settled into the box of rags next to his bed. It was a poor substitute for the nest built into the side of his bed in their actual room, but it worked for now. And with that, Mulrox retired to his own thoughts of cheers and applause and a scrawny, bright red ogre accepting the award for the Beatific Behemoth.

The next morning, Mulrox and the dozen ogres who made up the Raid Brigade were yawning, stretching, and whispering to one another at the practice grounds. Yahgurkin was there too. She had traded her necklace of mushrooms for one of pine cones and was stringing together a chain of daisies, oblivious to the outside world.

The practice grounds were a ten-mile jaunt from Ulgorprog. The place had once been a thriving human village, but finding themselves rather too close to the town of ogres, the humans had voluntarily relocated. At first, the ogres had been offended, but they soon realized their good fortune and adopted the abandoned huts, buildings, and pastures as their own. None of the ogres from the Raid Brigade were certified to enter a real human village yet, but here they were free to practice smashing to their hearts' content.

There were only two catches. First, the practice grounds were bordered on three sides by the Woods Mercurial. The wood was dense and snarled, a lightless landscape amidst the thick underbrush. No one wanted to be at the grounds too late; you never knew what might wander out of the woods. Second, there were no humans to go about fixing things. Instead, Ulgorprog's

mason and a handful of unlucky Raid Brigade students were forced into the distasteful tasks of rebuilding. The cleanup group was supposed to be randomly assigned, yet Mulrox always found himself among those picked to stay behind. He didn't relish smashing, but he hated cleanup as much as the next ogre.

The other ogres were still rubbing sleep from their eyes and complaining, but not Mulrox. Not that he wasn't sleepy—he was. Last night, Mulrox had tossed and turned, dreaming the dream that had come almost every night for the past year. In the dream, he was standing in the middle of a magnificent garden, talking to a vortex of purple light. He never remembered what it said. The more he thought about it, the more the fog crept in, clouding out the garden, the light, and turning the words to mush. He didn't know why he kept having the dreams, but he woke up afterward feeling tired and content. He assumed it was nothing to worry about.

Mulrox knew better than to mention this to anyone. Everyone thought he was weird enough as it was. He tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. He had found this to be the best strategy for avoiding torment. It had taken Mulrox several painful years to realize that the things that delighted his parents only angered the other ogres. That to fit in was to keep safe, and the only way to do that was to keep quiet.

He forced himself to appear attentive as Groxor, their captain, addressed the group.

"Ogres," Groxor said. "Sit down. Three rows. No, Yexel, behind Wertol. Straight lines, not squiggles." Groxor sighed. "Alright, listen, the village is shaped like a kidney."

It wasn't. It was a rectangle like the other human villages, but there was no telling Groxor this.

Groxor drew an unrecognizable shape in the dirt with a stick, his protruding bottle-cap ears wiggling in the breeze.

"You four," he pointed into the group, "head out that way. Cover the rear in the Wytrog pattern. You two take this bend here, standard Kuterbuck maneuver. We'll approach in waves.

Like when Ikarax the Insidious stood before the waters of the Taloob, or when I single-handedly took on the dread ship Billibob. Questions?”

An ogre in front of Mulrox raised her hand tentatively, but Groxor looked right through her. No matter what new scheme Groxor came up with, the ogres did the same thing every time, yet Yexel was always trying to figure it out.

“Good. I want nothing irregular.” Groxor smoothed out imaginary wrinkles from his shirt with his palms. “We’ve practiced this a hundred times before. No dithering, trust yourself.”

Easy enough for Groxor.

The ogres fanned out, sneaking along the borders of the village until they had it surrounded. By the time Mulrox found a secluded spot, the others had already started their rhythmic banging. He slung his soup pot round his neck, flipped it over, and pulled his bone mallets from their sling on his back. He pounded a matching rhythm on the bottom of the pot. This was all part of the procedure—announce your arrival, clear the village, destroy everything, let the humans creep back. A squashed debtor couldn’t pay the governors what he owed, but a scared one made amends quite quickly.

Groxor’s shrill all-clear whistle echoed across the yard, and the drumming stopped.

Mulrox sighed as he pushed the soup pot back behind him and scooped up an armful of stones. Time to smash stuff.

Mulrox wandered to the center of the grounds, watching as the other ogres set to work, scrambling up walls, overturning flagstones, kicking at fence posts. They were a swarm of locusts, descending, demolishing.

“Incoming!” someone called. Mulrox saw the rock hurtling toward him just before it hit him in the shoulder. He grunted.

“Sorry,” Oogin said. He rushed past Mulrox, shaking his head and blinking. “Bad aim.”

It was no wonder Oogin had hit him. Oogin couldn’t see

more than a few feet in front of him, and he refused to wear glasses of any kind. He claimed they made him look fussy.

“It’s okay, Oogin. I—”

“Look where you’re going next time,” someone else sneered. Broxli’s gangly green form appeared out from behind a hut. Those two were inseparable. Oogin clung to Broxli like a sloth to a tree. Broxli was so busy smashing things with his wrestling moves he hardly noticed the outside world. Broxli clamped a green arm around Oogin’s shoulders and, bringing his head of short, curly hair down next to Oogin’s bald yellow one, steered him away from Mulrox. The two barked in laughter as they disappeared behind the nearest hut.

They weren’t locusts, Mulrox decided. Locusts didn’t relish destruction like ogres. Locusts were hungry. For ogres, smashing and crushing were practically sacred. Even Vrokta had written poems about it. Mulrox had done his best to study these, hoping to better understand the urge, but despite the striking words, the poems didn’t connect with him. The only things he tore up with relish were his own terrible ideas, and that was out of self-preservation.

Mulrox tossed a stone at the nearest hut. The rock ricocheted off the wall, falling into the weeds. He threw another to the same effect.

It was as though the other ogres were connected, receiving a hidden signal he didn’t hear or understand.

“Deaf to the dinner bell of destruction,” he said, the words popping into his head and out his mouth unbidden.

Someone snorted behind him. Groxor was doubled with laughter.

“That—that’s the worst thing I’ve ever heard. Next you’ll be singing about ribbons and hearts and unicorns.”

“I...” Mulrox started, glaring at the dirt as though he might disappear under it. He knew by the heat radiating from his face that it had darkened by several shades. “I read it somewhere.”

“Not a chance, mumble mouth. No one but you would

come up with something so awful. Broxli, come here. You'll never believe this."

"I liked it," a voice said from behind them.

For the faintest moment, Mulrox believed someone had understood him. "Dinner bell of destruction. It certainly makes you think." He turned and his hope died. It was Yahgurkin.

Mulrox closed his eyes. If she liked it, it was surely another terrible idea. "Groxor," Mulrox said. "You're right. It's awful. I'll..."

But Groxor wasn't paying attention to Mulrox—he was staring at Yahgurkin. She was standing at the edge of the Woods Mercurial, and in her hands, she held a small pumpkin and a fistful of moss.

"What is this? What are you doing?" Groxor strode over to her.

"Well, first I was harvesting herbs, but I saw these pumpkins had sprung up on their own. Can you imagine? They call them volunteers when they do that. They planted themselves! Isn't that amazing?"

This was his chance to escape. Groxor would probably forget all about him. Mulrox took a few steps backward.

"I'll let the others grow, but I thought one might be nice back home, so I grabbed it."

"They planted themselves?" Groxor leaned over the plants, glaring at the curly vines. Then he shook his head as if to clear it. "Nonsense. There's no garden here. This is the practice grounds. It's abandoned."

"Sure, it's not much of a garden, but it's a start. I add a little more each week."

Mulrox stared at Yahgurkin, his mouth hanging open. This definitely didn't fall under standard ogre behavior.

Sure enough, at Yahgurkin's feet was the beginnings of a small garden: a patch of leafy vines with brilliant orange flowers running along the base of the trees. In front of this were several

fresh mounds of dirt, out of which poked the round, little arms of seedlings.

“You made this?” The words tumbled out of Mulrox’s mouth.

Groxor glared back at Mulrox, freezing Mulrox in place.

“Sometimes I bring a few seeds—other times I find stuff. I had just found this tree moss when I heard Mulrox talking to himself.”

“This is highly irregular,” Groxor said, waving at the garden.

“Not really.” Yahgurkin stuffed the moss into a pouch on her right. “But I’ll bring one home to make sure. They seem like especially good pumpkins.”

“You can’t plant a garden here!”

“It’s easy, actually. I’m always on cleanup, so I’m here a lot. Plus, plants are much hardier than most ogres suspect. They grow fine in the wild.”

“You’re an ogre! This is a raid! You’re not supposed to be making anything. Give me that!”

Groxor rushed at her and tried to snatch the pumpkin, but Yahgurkin was taller than him and lifted the gourd above her head, out of his grasp.

The others had noticed this interchange and stopped their smashing to come watch. Mulrox was shorter than the others, and they elbowed in front of him, blocking his view. The others gasped. Mulrox cursed and darted around behind them.

Yahgurkin stood with the pumpkin held above her head. Groxor lunged for it and missed.

Mulrox smiled.

“Yahgurkin, as captain of the Raid Brigade, I must—”

“Junior captain,” Yahgurkin said. “There aren’t any real captains until you’re no longer in training, and you’re still only two badges in.”

Mulrox was shaking with silent laughter.

“They’ve promised me my third! End of the month, they

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said. It's a sure thing. Besides, I'm the youngest raid leader they've ever had, you know that."

"Junior raid leader."

Mulrox couldn't stifle it any longer—he burst into giggles.

Groxor spun to face him. The glare was enough to make Mulrox's knees weak. He knew what it meant.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean..." Mulrox said.

Groxor strode toward him. Mulrox backpedaled until he felt his arms scratch against something. There was a thick, musty smell. *Oh no.*

Mulrox risked a glance behind him. He was standing right at the edge of the Woods Mercurial. He couldn't go any farther. When he turned back, one of Groxor's massive green fingers was an inch from Mulrox's face.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Not you," Mulrox stammered. "I... I was... Yahgurkin..."

"Get out of here," Groxor bellowed and shoved Mulrox with both hands.

Mulrox tried to catch himself, but as he wound his arms backward, his ankle twisted out from under him and he went down. Tree branches battered against him and his feet flew over his head. He was rolling, tumbling through the trees, directly into the Woods Mercurial.

Mulrox rolled a long way, sliding through piles of moss and pine needles, an avalanche of small stones and branches cascading around him. He scrambled for tree roots, shrubs, anything to slow his descent, but the roots broke off, the bushes uprooted, and he only tumbled faster. He tried not to panic, but it was no use. With each scrape and scratch, he was tumbling deeper and deeper into the woods.

Mulrox slammed against something hard and bounced, rolling once more before he found himself lying facedown in a thick pile of moss. A tumult of needles and pine cones plunked around him. Once the barrage stopped, he lifted his head.

He was lying in the middle of a ring of six trees that stood in an almost-perfect circle. The trunks were so close together that the fuzzy red bark resembled walls around a forested room. The ground was covered in a thick layer of pine needles, and poking up through this was the wildest collection of fungus Mulrox had ever seen. Bright blue and orange and white. There were round puffballs and leafy growths and tall stalks with tiny caps. Shelf fungus ran up the side of the trees like spiral staircases. Above him, the branches of overlapping needles blocked out the sky.

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He had only fallen for a few seconds, but he had never felt farther away from home in his life.

This was not good. Ogres who strayed into the woods were always being turned into stone or cursed by some do-gooder. And fairy rings—they were even more dangerous.

He pushed to his feet.

“Ow!!” a high voice squealed.

Mulrox swiveled, looking for his would-be attacker.

“Get off!” the voice said again. “Get OFF! GET OFF!”

But Mulrox didn’t see anyone; it was just him and the trees.

“You great pile of stank rot!” The voice was panting now.
“Move... your... foot!”

Though Mulrox still couldn’t find the speaker, he obeyed, taking two careful steps to the side. In answer, he heard a deep exhalation and then a gasp.

“No, no, no! Not my tail! YOU—”

Sharp pain rushed through his legs.

“Hey!”

Below him was an animal, six inches tall, shrouded in a hooded cloak. It was balanced on its hind legs and slashing away at Mulrox’s shins with its front paws.

A cold sweat trickled down Mulrox’s back. The creature was unmistakable. They were in a fairy ring of ancient redwoods that marked its home. It was as the stories had said. He would surely be cursed now.

“This is an outrage!” the little creature continued. “You smashed all the way here, no consideration of how things are done, knocking everything over, and then, and then... BREAKING someone’s tail!” The animal let out a miserable moan. Its front paws trembled and it fell over flat on its side. “Gah! It hurts,” it said.

Its striped head popped out of the hooded cloak, and the creature glared at Mulrox, giving him a clear view of the animal’s enormous cheeks, wriggling nose, and pair of inch-long, yellowish teeth. Two tiny, fuzzy ears poked up through little

holes cut in the hood's top. Mulrox had rolled down the hill right onto a squirrelmonk. He was a goner.

"Never in my entire life—of all the indignities—I, Lady Rodenia Marmotti the Eighth, a squirrelmonk, the highest order of rodent—"

Mulrox swallowed. "Sorry, I didn't see you there. I'll just be leaving."

"You certainly will not." The little animal was back on her feet now, waving her arms about. "Just as I had spotted the most perfect acorn hanging helpless in the branches over there," she pointed to a nearby tree, "you come avalanching down that hillside, smack into my tree, and knock me from the branches. Bad enough, but then you go and trample my tail! Now look at it!"

Mulrox peered around the little creature. A thin and very battered tail stuck out below the cloak, bent at an angle that didn't look right.

He grimaced. "Sorry."

"I should hope so!" Rodenia said. "But what am I going to do with your lousy apology? It's not going to bring that acorn back or fix my tail."

"I can grab you acorns." He searched for a sign of encouragement, but the squirrelmonk was glaring at him.

Mulrox decided to try anyway. He slipped through the ring of trees in the direction the creature had pointed and spotted a large oak tree only a few feet away. He plucked several handfuls of acorns from the tree before returning and placing the nuts at the hooded figure's feet.

"Here," he said.

"Well," she huffed, her paws grabbing at one another under her chin. "You, um..." She licked her lips. Without warning, the squirrelmonk reached out and snatched three of the acorns and shoved them into her mouth. Her cheeks ballooned out like a parachute unfurling, doubling the width of her little face.

“Are you going to curse me? If so, please just get it over with? It’s been a rough day and—”

“Curse you?” the animal sputtered, and two of the nuts shot out of her mouth. “Listen, you great oaf, I’m not going to curse you. A message is all. Some might even consider it a blessing. I was going to come find you, but I suppose you took care of that.”

“Me? Are you sure? There are lots of ogres up that hill.” Mulrox pointed toward the river of broken branches and uprooted bushes.

“This message is for you. I only deal with the real wackos, like yourself. Something’s wrong with you, so much so that the universe knows it.”

“So it is a curse.”

“Fine, it’s a curse. Life’s a curse! I am cursed to be here and not asleep in my burrow because my wondrous, perfect, enchanting, golden walnut is gone. So let’s get on with this. Now, if you don’t mind.” The squirrelmonk spit out the remaining nuts and pulled the hood lower over her face. She waved her little claws. “Mulrox,” the squirrelmonk said in a voice much slower and deeper than before. “Tonight you will—”

“No, thank you!” Mulrox shouted, and before he knew what he was doing, he had his hands wrapped around the creature’s mouth. “That’s enough. I’m fine as I am. No messages needed.”

Pain needled through his hands, and he dropped the animal. Two bite marks stood out on his red skin, welling with blood.

“No more touching,” Rodenia said.

Mulrox nodded.

The creature scampered a few feet away and then sat on her haunches, regarding him. “You really don’t want to be transformed from your current wretched state?” she asked. “I foresee great things for you.”

“No, I’m fine,” Mulrox said, his hope rising. He was sure this was the right answer; it was asking for wishes, wanting the wrong thing, that got you in trouble.

“From an outside perspective, you desperately need it.”

“I’ll manage.”

Rodenia shook her head. “Ogres. Your lack of perspective is incredible.” She clapped her paws together. “Well, that’s too bad. Events are in motion, big forces, dragon poked, that sort of thing. It can’t be helped. You’ll just have to do your best.”

Mulrox’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Why did you ask then?”

“Curiosity. Plus, I thought you might feel better if you thought you chose what happens next.”

“But I didn’t choose.”

“No, no one ever does. If we left it up to you, no one would ever change.”

She smoothed back the fur around her face in several quick movements. Then she leaned in toward Mulrox. “Here’s the deal, kid. We squirrelmonks are keepers of the golden walnuts. Mine disappeared, so things are about to get weird. It will be rough for you—I can see that.”

Mulrox was going to protest, but she cut him off.

“No,” she said, holding up a paw before Mulrox could speak. “No more details. But you’re lucky—there’s something on its way to help you as we speak.”

“Is this because of your tail? Because I am sorry about that. I can make you a sling—perhaps out of your cloak?”

“You stay away from my tail,” Rodenia said, backing up and wrapping her cloak about her. She winced. “Go home. You’ll find out more soon enough.”

“Do you have any advice for me at least?”

“Yes,” the squirrelmonk said and puffed up. “Look where you are going next time.”

Mulrox scowled at the ground. This was happening too fast. It might not be as bad as she was making it seem. She could be exaggerating.

“Well, good luck with that,” Rodenia said. She had

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scampered further away and was sitting up in the branches of a nearby tree.

“You’re leaving?” Mulrox looked around him. He was penned in by enormous trees, deep in the Woods Mercurial. “Wait! Where are we? Please, how do I get home?”

Rodenia hesitated. “See that?” She pointed behind her. Mulrox saw a lot of trees.

“Uh...” Mulrox said.

“The moss, you numbskull.”

The trees behind her had a coating of emerald moss so thick, it looked as though they were wearing fuzzy green jackets. Mulrox frowned, growing nervous. “I...”

“It only grows on one side. Keep the mossy forest behind you, and you’ll be heading north. Walk long enough—you’ll find your way out. Get it?”

Mulrox peered in the direction she had indicated.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “It looks pretty dark.”

But there was no answer. Rodenia was gone.



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Kerelyn Smith is a writer of literary, speculative, and children's fiction. By day she is a software engineer, but she gets up in the wee hours of the morning to write. She lives in Seattle, WA, with her partner and dog, and enjoys hiking, gardening, and overcomplicating things. *Mulrox and the Malcognitos* is her first novel.

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