

CHAPTER ONE: BIGGER GIANTS

“Hello, little mouse. What aren't *you* doing?”

Lamplight flickered in a shiny black eye; whiskers twitched. Anxious breathing pulsed under slate-grey fur.

“Oh, forgive me. You are not considered little among your people. I can see that you are a fierce and brave mouse.” Happen Fell lifted split firewood, fir and hemlock, bark shaggy with greyish dried moss, and dropped pieces into a wheelbarrow one at a time, trying not to think about the letter, the one that might be, hopefully should be, waiting for him in the house. A mouse watched from one end of the slowly dwindling stack against the barn wall. Happen rolled the loaded barrow to the drying porch on the south side of the house, stacked the wood there in crossed pairs to allow ventilation, and then returned along the worn dirt path edged with low ferns, mosses, oxalis, lichen-covered rocks, and deepening shadows. The remains of the sunset finished spilling off the edge of the world, but left the sky glowing as if it had eaten the sun and was digesting it with a slow, blue-violet satisfaction.

Happen soaked up the glow as best he could. It could be the last sunset he'd see for half a year. Unless the letter from his uncle had come while he had been out walking Abernathy on the gravel paths by the oat fields. To check the mail, though, he had to first finish his chores. But here he was standing, still as the grand hemlocks surrounding his home. *What if the letter said 'no'?*

“There you are. Not afraid of a squeaky old wheelbarrow.” Arriving back at the barn, he took a few more splits from the stack, as far away from his little friend as possible, then saw the edge of a nest built with twigs, strips of cedar bark, and dried moss.

“Not afraid when there's a family and a home to defend.” He filled the wheelbarrow from a different part of the stack, then idly rolled it to the house, imagining what the animal might be thinking. The wood stack's defender might even be Happen's age in mouse-years: having survived the blithe summer of its childhood, but not yet entering the chill winter of adult responsibility. When Happen returned to the barn, the mouse streaked across the dirt floor from the opposite wall, re-occupying his wood stack after some errand. *Probably checking his mail.*

“Swift as falcon shadow you are, little mouse. And as quiet.” Happen shook a spider off his elkhide glove, and loaded more wood into the wheelbarrow, exposing another nest.

“I see you have neighbors.” He couldn't see the mouse now, but felt it watching from some shadowy gap between the logs, so he kept talking to it to distract himself from the shadow lurking in a dark corner of his mind, the possibility that he might have to wait another year to leave. “They're like the villagers in the second *Odais Chronicles* book. All their lives this wood stack has provided safety and comfort. But then, without warning, their home is being dismantled, and with autumn rains due any day now. And so they've sent you to repel the giant.”

It was oddly similar to that story from his favorite book series, except this giant was thin, with thick brown hair tufted heedlessly over a high forehead, instead of stout, fat-nosed, and balding. Also, his parents always said he looked curious and interested in everything except for his chores, but he pictured the fictional giant's face with a mean and dim-witted expression as he dropped chunks of the castle wall into his gigantic wheelbarrow.

“Fierce and brave you may be, but what can you do against an enemy so large? They didn't even give you a magic sword or anything.”

The little nest invited him softly in the warm lamplight, lined with dun fur and bits of down bravely scavenged from the feathery remains of a cat's meal. He wanted to curl up all tiny and take a nap in it, not destroy it. Maybe if he left some of the wood, over in that corner, his father wouldn't notice it. Not this year anyway.

Not wanting to leave his smell on the animal's home, he lifted the wood surrounding the first nest, grunting under the weight of eight split logs, and carried them to the corner. He moved the other nest in the same way, and stacked a few pieces gingerly on top to hide the exposed nests.

“This might work, little mouse, and it might not,” Happen said with a sigh. “There are bigger giants in this world than I.”

“Hap!” his father yelled from the back door of the house. “Aren't you done yet?”

Happen quickly tossed a couple armfuls of wood thunk-thunk into the wheelbarrow and rolled squeaking out the barn door, careening toward the house calling out, “Almost.”

“Bring the lamp in. You've used enough oil as it is without doing your day's work at night. Might even speed you up a bit.”

“Yes, sir. That makes sense. I can finish moving that wood tomorrow.”

“No, you’ll finish tonight after you bring the lamp in. Do today’s chores today. By thunder, you know this!”

Happen did not respond, but returned to the barn, extinguished the lamp, and brought it back to the house. He knew there’d be no point in asking about the letter yet. Grateful for the gray moonlight illuminating the dusty yard, he finished moving the firewood, feeling his way with gloved hands in the dark barn.

“We saved you some dinner,” his father said as Happen entered the dark kitchen, where a small fire still burned in the summer stove, the flicker and glow from its smudged window illuminating the gray-blue flagstone floor, and the rim of the glass in the unlit lamp on the table. “But you’ll have to guess what it is in this light.”

“Have you heard from Uncle Tinker?” Happen asked, breathing in the aroma of roasted elk, onions, and garlic, as his father ladled some stew into a bowl. Reginall Fell limped from the stove to the table with a bowl in one hand, and a stout maple crutch in the other, while Happen washed his hands in the stone sink and wiped them on his linen shirt.

“The doctor came up from Pury today by the tull trail, all that way to check on my splint and make sure the bone is setting properly. Also...brought us a letter from Tinker.” He limped back to the stove, grabbed a bowl from a shelf, and ladled some stew into it. “Might as well have another with you. There’s a little left if you want more,” he said with the hint of a smile starting in his eyes as the firelight kindled the bits of gray in his auburn beard. Happen knew his father was enjoying himself and would wait, would make him ask. He didn’t seem to know about the sickly feeling that had been squeezing in Happen’s gut since the accident endangered what would be his first trip off this miserable peninsula. But the letter had come. He squeezed the ceramic bowl between his hands, trying to stay calm by looking down and following the tight grain pattern in his wooden spoon.

“Yes, sir,” he said in a shaky voice. “What did he say?”

“Thanks for asking. He says the bone’s setting just fine, but I’ll have to stay off it till Longest Night at least.”

“The letter, Father!”

“Oh, you meant what did *Tinker* say! I should have known. Your uncle approves of the plan, though he says Cortham will be jealous.”

“So, that means...he approves, so that means I'm going?”

“Yes. Your mother is making new boots for your trip right now.”

Happen took a deep breath, and the lurking shadow retreated. In two days he'd be on his way to the autumn trade fair at last.

Happen hadn't slept well, but was too excited to keep trying, so he crept down to the kitchen early. The sun hadn't yet eclipsed the dense forest to the east, but the sky was bright and it filled the room with a soft, indirect light. Now that he knew he was leaving, the sights and smells of his home warmed his heart. The kitchen table, made from sturdy maple slabs rounded with pumice, smoothed with sharkskin, and finished with linseed oil, seemed steeped in warmth, laughter, and love, and had earned a golden hue and scores of nicks and scratches from three generations of refinishing and hard use. At this time of year the table, and the rest of the kitchen, smelled of drying apples.

He settled down at the table with a piece of bread to reread the last episode of *The Cravey Mysteries*. The best thing about the autumn trade fair was the stack of the *Sirreltish Seasonal* that his father always brought home. The *Sirreltish Seasonal* was published quarterly and included news from Aquilegin and elsewhere around the four continents, but also several serialized fictional works. *The Cravey Mysteries* were his favorite. In each episode, Inspector Cravey scoured the big city for clues to some outlandish crime, and always found some clever way to catch the villain.

When his mother entered the kitchen, she put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently.

“Hap, dear. You don't have time for reading today.”

“I'm almost done.” He was almost to his favorite part, where Inspector Cravey saved the lovely Miss Maple from the kidnappers by disguising himself as a chimney sweep.

“No. Put the *Seasonal* down and listen to me.”

Happen used his finger to mark his place, but he set it down and looked at her. Darlem Barlawine Fell's long brown hair was tied back, and her quick brown eyes squinted with worry as she considered her son. “Your father can't pack the cart this year, or ride Abernathy. After your morning chores, you'll need to ride Abernathy on the gravel again to prepare his hooves. We also need you to get ahead on the firewood and help with autumn cleaning. We're counting

on your help. It will only be seven days till the Windy Mester by the time you get back. There's so much to do before you can even start packing."

"Can't we get Osgar to do some of all that?"

"You know that Osgar went home after harvest, Lazytoes," she said, laughing at him. "He's got his own mother to help get ready for the winter. And I've got to prepare for the start of school, dry more apples, and bake bannock for your trip. We also have to jar the rest of the garden harvest. I'll make you a list."

Happen slouched, staring at his boots. A list day.

"Come on. You can get it done if you stick to business. Start with the cow." She pulled the *Sirreltish Seasonal* out of his hand. "This is something you want to do, yes?"

Dinner that night was interrupted by the pounding hoofbeats of a tull cantering towards the house. The tull slowed as it passed the house and headed towards the barn. Reginall lifted his splinted leg off the chair, grabbed his crutch, and limped toward the back door.

A loud, whiny voice called from out by the stable, and his father responded tersely.

"It's only Osgar," Reginall said, returning through the kitchen.

"He just left two days ago!" Darlem said. She did not like surprises, and she did not like Osgar.

"Says he's got news. Hap, fetch us a couple pints, would you lad? And bring me a stool from the kitchen."

Osgar Tallowey had been working for the Fells since he was thirteen. Other employees hadn't lasted more than a year, blaming the dank Irelian weather and moving on, but Osgar always came back, every year for seven years, and for that he was given ale at the table when he arrived, like a guest. A skinny man with dark eyes and long limbs, something about the way he slouched over his mug with his elbows poking out on either side reminded Happen of a spider. Darlem loaded a plate for him, asking after his family. Happen waited, annoyed that Osgar got to sit in his old chair, his father's leg suddenly able to rest on a kitchen stool.

"I confess I'm mighty curious what could get you all the way back out here so soon," Reginall said.

Osgar had a habit that drove Happen crazy: when he told you anything, even something obvious like 'it's raining out,' he'd first look around as if checking to make sure no one else

would overhear what he was about to say. He did this now, his stringy white hair dragging on the table as he checked the kitchen and the front hall for potential eavesdroppers.

“I heard some rumors at the Crackling Fire about trouble on the roads,” Osgar began. “I knew you were planning to send the young master to the fair in your stead, any day now in fact, so I hurried out right away.” He always called Happen ‘young master’ in his father’s presence.

“The inland route especially,” he continued. “There’s troublesome wanderers on the road, likes of which we haven’t seen around here. Old Bahnsen says they must be from very far away. Jocco says we haven’t had so many strangers come through since ever.” Happen tensed. He was getting a familiar bad feeling about Osgar’s news.

Osgar paused to sample the ale, glanced furtively at Happen, then resumed his focus on Reginall. Happen’s mind raced. He’d seen that look before. His old nemesis was up to something. Why else would he ride the three leagues from Pury with news of trouble on the road, especially the part of the road his father was most concerned about? Then he saw it. Osgar was trying to keep him from going!

“So that’d be about three strangers then,” Happen blurted out sarcastically. Even though he’d never been to Pury, he’d heard about Jocco’s reputation for exaggeration.

“Hold your tongue,” his father said sharply.

Happen stood up and edged over towards the pantry—his heart was rushing, and he needed space to breathe and think while still keeping an ear on the conversation.

“I don’t think it’s safe for the young master to be out on the road these days,” Osgar said. “Not in these troubled times. Not at his age.” Then he added: “With respect, sir.”

Happen couldn’t believe this was happening again. It was like the first time he went fishing by himself. It was like the first time he’d been allowed to walk to Cor’s house from school. He hadn’t seen Osgar coming then either. He stood in the pantry with his fists clenched and his forehead against a shelf, the rough cedar plank pressing an imprint on his skin as he waited for the dizzying sick feeling to fade. His father would listen to his only reliable employee. They spent so much time working together, harvesting and grinding the oats, felling trees, hunting elk...

“Well Osgar, how’s about you tell us what you actually know about the nature of these unusual travelers,” Father said. He heard a trace of skepticism in his father’s voice, and returned as far as the doorway, where he could see the two men talking.

“Right, sir, I was getting to that. Bahnsen said he'd seen one guy whose coat shimmered like it was wet, only it wasn't. And it was blue like the summer sky, he said. Miss Jainter saw it too and said it wasn't like any fabric she'd ever seen. Like it was made of wet paint she said.”

“Surely unusual fabric is nothing to be afraid of?”

“Right, sir, but what do you make of this? Rister's cousin, she sold an apple to one of these travelers, and he sliced it open with a shiny knife harder and sharper than knapped flint, she said. He saw her eyeing it, and showed how it could cut right through an elk bone blade like it was a child's toy. But the strangest thing I heard, what isn't being talked about in the open. Two of them didn't stop in town, but went through on a wagon in midday. Mr. Fell, they didn't have mouths.”

“What?!”

“That's just what I said, too. Word is, they looked close enough to regular folks except they didn't have mouths. Their faces were just...smooth there. Jocco and Rister swore up and down it was true. I wouldn't believe them but with all this other stuff going on...”

Happen was surprised. Osgar was really piling on the tull dung. But his father wasn't the sort to tell ghost stories. Osgar should know that this kind of story won't sway him.

Father paused and considered for a moment.

“Surely it was a trick of the light, or perhaps some of their unusual clothing that made these travelers appear the way they did.”

“By thunder, I didn't think about it being unusual clothing. That might explain it and there sure has been a lot of that about. Explain it part ways anyhow—I don't know why anyone would want to wear something like that. Still, though, could be folks are over-reacting a bit. Been known to do that on occasion at the Crackling Fire. However, I was thinking, considering the unusual circumstances, I'd offer to go in his stead, sir. I could make sure your trade meets your expectations, no lamp oil spilled, if you know what I mean, sir.”

Happen startled, outraged. What did he mean, ‘no lamp oil spilled’? He'd used too much lamp oil reading at night, but he hadn't spilled any! He went to the kitchen to fill glasses of water for everybody, so he could spill Osgar's in his lap. It took a long time to fill the glasses. Bartholofew Fell's grandson Bardinall had built an aqueduct to bring water from a nearby spring into the kitchen, and it tended to run low in the late summer. Tonight just a thin trickle sauntered

lazily down the carved stone sluice by the sink. Fetching the tray and glasses, he had missed some of his father's response, but waiting for the glasses to fill, he could hear better.

"...mature enough by now to benefit from a trip like this." Had he been talking about Happen?

"Another option would be for me to escort him myself, sir, to see to it that he arrives on time and returns safely and all that." Happen cringed at the thought of traveling for six days with Osgar.

"I thank you for the offer, and for coming all the way out here to share the news with us. He'll only be on the inland route alone for a couple leagues, and my brother will be with him after that, so there's no need to send you as well. Feel free to join us for breakfast before you leave tomorrow morning. Also, if you could please, when you get to Pury, take a message to my brother for me, and tell him that preparations have taken longer than I expected when I wrote him, and Happen won't be arriving in Pury till Midluskday, probably by dinnertime."

Osgar thanked Darlem for dinner, and headed out to his room above the barn. He didn't look at Happen as he passed through the kitchen, taking an apple from the bowl on the table.

Happen breathed again. He'd been wound up tight like when they twisted up the rope swing at school to make the little kids dizzy. He breathed intentionally a couple more times. A small part of him, he was surprised to discover, was also relieved that he wasn't leaving in the morning; that he had one more day at home.