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THE NOT-SO-GOBLIN BOY

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I stood in my room and stared at my reflection in the mirror, fidgeting with my clothes for the tenth time in the last two minutes. I just didn’t look right. I looked like a stupid, ugly human! I glared at my features. My hair was a dark gritty brown colour. No matter how many disgusting liquids I washed it with, it never looked quite like oily black goblin hair. Oh sure, it was so putrid that it stood up at gravity-defying angles all by itself, but that didn’t matter if the colour wasn’t right.

As for my body, it was a mass of disappointment. Goblins had pot bellies, wonderfully long arms for stealing things and short legs for quick getaways. Nothing like my long legs and stupidly proportioned arms.

And don’t even get me started on my face. Goblins had stretched, angular faces with pointy
noses and ears. My face was round and looked like everything fitted on it. Even my skin was a gross light-brown colour. No amount of grit or dirt or rolling in rotting garbage ever managed to get my skin to the odd green hue of a goblin’s.

Last, but not least, was my smell. I never smelled horrible enough. A goblin stench should be able to knock out a wild animal as soon as it gets a whiff. The last time a zebradog had a whiff of me, it had tried to mate with me. It wasn’t fair. Why was I the only stupid human in the entire world?

Five hundred years ago, the earth changed. The world shook and rumbled and split, and a strange yellow energy spread through the air. Every creature on earth transformed. They became unicorns, or ogres, or orcs or elves or a hundred other things that had never existed before. Eventually, they figured out what the yellow was. Apparently the world works in two cycles. When it’s asleep, there’s no yellow magic, no ogres, no wizards and witches; just nice, boring, normal humans and machines. When the earth is awake, however, everything changes. There’s
magic, so much magic that it infects everything. Turns everything inside out, upside down. All the technology and machinery humankind had come to rely on stopped working. Everything in the world had been replaced by things people only read about in books, daydreamed about under clouds, or cried out about during nightmares.

Twelve years ago, I was born – the only ordinary human in the world. No magic, no nothing. I guess my birth parents had been so disappointed with me they abandoned me as soon as I was born. Dad and Mum found me and took me in as their own son. Problem was, they were goblins, and I was struggling just to be a bad imitation.

But today I needed to be as gobliny as possible. Today was the day of the goblin exams, where even an outcast like me had a chance to be accepted into the Goblin Academy. Being a goblin wasn’t just about how you looked, it was about how horrible you could be. About how smart and devious you were. And, of course, how good you were at engineering. My parents had been at the top of their class. If I
didn’t get in, I’d be disappointing the only people who had ever loved me.

“Sam. Saaam! Are you ready up there? You’ll be late!”

“I’m coming, Dad,” I shouted.

I turned away from the mirror, glancing about my room, which also acted as my makeshift laboratory. My bed sat in the corner, half burned down from one of my experiments gone wrong. Scattered about my workbench were numerous devices that I had spent all night creating. As part of the exam you were allowed to bring one device you had made at home. My eyes drifted over the possible candidates: a gun that made you crave the taste of your own toenails, a laser that made boogers burst from your nose, and a cell replicator that made your hair grow uncontrollably. Of course, none of these devices compared to my final masterpiece, a crescent-shaped purple object that sat in the middle of my desk. A mixture of intricate wires, chips and moulded soft steel, all forming the greatest weapon against a goblin that had ever been made: the fart
forcer. One shot from this bad boy and a goblin would lose control of their bowels, farting nonstop until they were completely depleted of all internal gases. I grinned, picked up the device and headed downstairs.

On the last step, I paused. Once I stepped down there was no going back. No running away from the exam. No failing. Maybe if I just stayed here, time would freeze and I wouldn’t have to disappoint anyone, I thought.

Then there was a loud rumble, like the noises your stomach makes when you’re hungry, only a thousand times louder. My muscles tensed as I realised what it was. I leaped forward as a blast of hot gas exploded around the corner and swept up the steps, leaving the most foul-smelling aroma your nostrils ever had the pleasure of sniffing.

“Ha! That was a big one, eh?” Dad boasted.

I looked up at him from my spot on the floor. Dad was dark green and covered in warts. He probably did well with the female goblins in his younger years. His head seemed too small for his large droopy ears.
He had a long nose, pointy teeth and untrimmed retractable claws. His skin was coated in a thin layer of muck, a naturally secreted slime goblins used in muck magic. As for the tremendous blast of gas earlier, that had been a goblin fart. The gases they created inside their bodies were very different from my own, and the results were explosive.

“You were planning to ambush me, weren’t you?” I said accusingly.

Goblins loved farting on people. In fact there was hardly anything they enjoyed more. Dad had tried to explain the excitement of a good fart ambush to me once, but I had never understood it. Maybe it was because my farts couldn’t blow someone a hundred metres away. Or maybe I just wasn’t goblin enough to understand.

Then someone landed on me from behind. The weight of their body pushed the air out of my lungs as I desperately tried to roll free. Nope, no good. My eyes shot up to my father, who was grinning madly.

It had all been a trap – Dad was just a diversion! I had to get free …
I heard a loud rumble, a bubbling, then felt the pressure of a point-blank goblin fart pushing into my back. There was a brief moment of pain before the shock wave sent me skidding across the kitchen floor like I was ice-skating. The force of the blast snapped my stiff hair even further backwards than it already was and made my ripped clothes flap about. A moment later the smell hit. It was like rotten everything mixed with a disgusting something. I was having difficulty not vomiting.

“Ha ha! Nice one, dear!” Dad roared.

I looked up in time to see Mum and Dad high-five each other. Dad had been the decoy. He had released his fart earlier so I’d get off the bottom step. Mum had been the real fart ambush.

“We got you,” Mum said, pointing at me with a giant smile on her face.

I eyed Mum. She was smaller then my muscular father, and her green face was thin, angular. She was covered in muck and she was bouncing up and down while Dad did the robot dance. He was actually pretty good at it. Fart ambushes always
drove them a little crazy, but it was like that for all goblins.

“Yeah, you got me pretty good,” I said, getting to my feet.

“Don’t feel too bad, my boy, your mother and I used to team up back in our childhood days. Wasn’t a thing around that we didn’t fart on back then,” Dad boasted.

I had to admit, I hadn’t seen Mum’s fart ambush coming, and I prided myself on pre-empting any attack. Because if I didn’t, the moment my parents weren’t around to protect me, someone would do something horrible to me – that’s what happened when you were the only human around.

“We were just going to let you be, Samuel, but because it’s such a special day, we thought it’d be wonderful to start it off with a nice fart ambush! We remembered how much you liked to play fart ambush when you were a toddler,” Mum said excitedly.

They were both looking at me. Both wanting me to do something or say something, and I was
a hundred per cent sure neither of them wanted to hear the truth. Fart ambushes had been fantastic when I was a toddler – because I had thought I was a goblin. That had all changed as soon as I entered primary school and discovered I wasn’t the same as all the other little boys and girls. Kids could be cruel. My personality had been honed by years of name calling and taunting, endless fear for my wellbeing, and constant failure and disappointment in myself.

“I can’t believe you remembered that. Fart ambushes are my favourite,” I said cheerily.

“We made your favourite breakfast, dear,” Mum said, moving towards the kitchen bench where a large pile of thin, long black things lay. “I’ll just finish chopping it up.” She sliced them swiftly with her claws.

I sat down at the kitchen table. In the background I could hear a news report playing on the image projector.

“Yet another pirate attack has led to looting and plundering on the southern border of the elvan territories. Authorities are pressuring other guild
heads to turn over all information regarding the Pirate Guild. Communities are calling for the United Government to put a stop to air piracy altogether …”

“Ha! Put a stop to it. That’s never going to happen,” Dad said, grinning.

“Oh, to be a pirate. Sailing on a ship, looting at will – it’s so romantic!” Mum sighed.

Almost all goblins loved pirates. Goblins had a saying –if you can steal it, you can keep it. So the thought of being on a ship, looting towns and cities, was a fantasy of most goblins. But Mum and Dad’s love of pirates bordered on being obsessive. Maybe that was because they had lived such straight and narrow lives. They had finished top of the Goblin Academy and served the Empire diligently since. I don’t think they’d even left the Empire.

“I don’t see the big deal,” I muttered.

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“It’s a new era, son. You have to change with the times. The guilds will rule the world one day, with a great big shiny pirate captain at the head of them!” Dad said.
I frowned. There were two giant political powerhouses in the world. The first, and biggest, was the United Government, made up of the several different countries that had allied themselves together. All the main races were a part of it: elves, dwarves, dragons, gnomes, goblins and so on. Then, there were the guilds created by people who didn’t want to live under any government. They had started out small, and now they were everywhere. There was a guild for everything: pirates, fighters, monster hunters, pilots, you name it. The problem was that the United Government didn’t much like the guilds. They had issued laws saying that if you joined a guild you could no longer be a citizen of your home country. All the guildies lived on ships, roaming the skies without a home to return to.

“They’re brave … I suppose.” I said finally, if only so Dad didn’t scold me.

“Brave? They’re more then that, dear,” Mum said. “They’re strong and cunning and, what’s more, they get to loot so much cool stuff.”

“I would die happy if I was a pirate,” Dad added.
“Yes, Dad, of course,” I said rolling my eyes.

Dad grinned appreciatively at me. “I have to admit, Samuel, you’re looking very good this morning. Very goblin. And the stench of you – it’s fantastic! Why, you must have rolled in manure all night.”

I smiled, and it wasn’t an act. Dad had that kind of personality. He could make everyone around him feel in the mood for a joke. Which among goblins probably wasn’t good. Their jokes had a bad habit of ending in fatalities.

“Not all night,” I said.

“Dear, get a good long look at your son,” Dad said.

Mum stopped cutting and turned to study me closely. A single tear appeared in one of her pin-like black eyes and rolled down her cheek. She’s an even better actor than me.

“Why, the smell is so potent my eyes are watering. It’s truly the most rotten aroma I have ever encountered. This year everyone will know the name Samuel Bottlebum.”
There was another thing I disliked. My stupid, human-sounding name – Samuel! Apparently it had been left on some paper pinned to the blanket I had been wrapped in when I was abandoned. It was just so … so … human.

“I, um, was thinking that I might call myself Mukface instead of Samuel. What do you guys think?”

“Don’t be silly, Samuel’s a fine name, and it makes you different. There’re plenty of Mukfaces out there,” Mum said.

I know, that’s the point, I thought

“Well, eat up. I’d better get going, don’t want to be late on my first day,” Dad said.

I’d forgotten Dad had a new job. He was going to be the royal gunk depositor for the Grand Stinker himself, the ruler of the Goblin Empire. If muck is left to cake on the body, it becomes gunk, which gets used in all sorts of foods and cakes. Dad must have really delicious gunk to have got a job at the palace kitchens.

“Now remember, Sam, you’re guaranteed to
succeed. You’re a Bottlebum, after all. We never fail, right?” Dad said.

I felt a knot form in my stomach.

“Right,” I said.

Dad grinned and vanished out the door, leaving me alone with Mum. A horrible thought crept into my mind: What would I do if I failed? No, I wouldn’t! It didn’t matter who I had to crush to get there or what I had to do to make it happen, because failing meant betraying the hopes of the only two people in the world who loved me. And that was unthinkable.
Hank Zipzer wants to be number one, not the one who always gets it wrong.
A likeable, struggling hero that readers will adore.

AVAILABLE IN ALL GOOD BOOKSTORES
ALSO AVAILABLE:
THE FLAXFIELD QUARTET

BY TOBY FORWARD

IN A WORLD WHERE MAGIC HAS BECOME WILD, AND EVIL IS AFOOT, CAN THE FORCES FOR GOOD PREVAIL?