

Tanya, Princess of the Elves

by Larry Correia, 1977-

Published: 2011



Once upon a time, in the state of Mississippi, there dwelt an elf princess. The princess lived in the Enchanted Forest with her mother, the queen of the elves, in a ninety-foot long aluminum double-wide trailer.

“I’m bored, Momma,” the princess of the elves whined. She was sitting on the couch and painting her toenails. The princess had been complaining a lot lately. “This is stupid, stupid and boring.”

Queen Ilrondelia grunted and used the remote to turn up the volume on the TV so she wouldn’t have to listen to her youngest and only daughter. It was an infomercial about some blanket thing with sleeve holes for your hands so you could sit all warm on the couch and still work the remote. The queen decided she needed one of those and wondered if they made it in her size.

“Tanya! Write down that number,” the queen ordered. “I need one of them snuggly blankets for keeping warm.”

“You ain’t listening. How come you won’t let me do nothing?” Tanya said.

“You wanna do something? Get that skinny ass offa’ the couch and get a ink pen like I said!” the queen bellowed.

“Yes, your majesty,” Tanya answered sullenly, got up, and went to the kitchen.

“And fetch me some Ho-Hos while you’s at it...” the queen said, then thought about it. “And some ranch dressin’ for dippin’ sauce.” She returned her attention to the TV. Tanya came back, but as usual, took her sweet time, so the phone number was gone, and the queen would be forced to wait on getting her snuggly blanket with sleeves, but she did bring the box of Ho-Hos and the bottle of ranch dressing like she’d been told. The queen took the snack and glared disapprovingly at Tanya’s too-small shirt. “Your belly’s stickin’ out.”

“It’s fashion,” Tanya said. “You’re just jealous.”

The queen snorted. *Fashion*. The girl had no sense. Tanya went back to the couch, but one of the cats had taken her spot. Tanya tossed it on the floor and went back to painting her toes.

The queen forgot about the TV for a minute and concentrated on her kid. She didn’t do that very often. “So... You wanna do something?” the queen asked.

Tanya sighed. “Yeah, I do.”

“So the Enchanted Forest ain’t good ‘nuff no mo?”

“That ain’t what I meant,” Tanya said. “But elves used to do stuff. You know. *Outside*.”

The queen of the elves pondered on that while she unwrapped a Ho-Ho and squirted ranch dressing on it. Her people had a sweet deal. The government paid them good money to stay right here in the Enchanted Forest, but some of the younger elves were getting uppity, talking about *adventure*. They’d been watching too many movies with fancy movie elves in them. They didn’t realize how good they had it here in the Enchanted Forest.

The world had moved on. It wasn’t a magic world no more. It was a world of techno-thingies and computing boxes and inter-webs. It wasn’t a world fit for her kind.

The queen knew her youngest was going to be a problem child since she’d gotten that butterfly tramp-stamp tattooed on her back. Somehow she’d gotten it in her head that she wanted to “see the world” and such nonsense. She even talked to those damn pixies. Hell, the girl probably didn’t have the smarts not to consort with a filthy orc if left on her own. But since Tanya was the prettiest girl in the trailer park she had all the boys wrapped around her finger. Her crazy talk could cause trouble. Trouble could make it so that the government checks quit coming.

The government didn’t want people knowing about monsters or magic or the things that lived on the outskirts. Other than shopping at the Walmart, the Elves kept to themselves. All it would take was one dumb youngster to go and pull something stupid in town, and their sweet gig would be up. And with Tanya flouncing around like a cheap pixie, talking to humans, and sneaking out, it was only a matter of time. The princess was a pain in her ass.

“Tanya, Tanya, Tanya,” the queen said around a mouth full of Ho-Ho, “what am I gonna do wit’ you?”

Tanya looked up from her toes. “Let me travel. You let other elves go out. You let Elmo and the trackers get work.”

That much was true. She wasn't above farming out her people for odd jobs, under the table of course, to supplement the government checks. In fact, Harbinger from MHI had called earlier, saying he needed a diviner, and he was willing to pay big bucks for only a few days labor. "So that's what you's all spun up on? Cause I'm sendin' Elmo with that boss Hunter? That's 'cause there're some elves smart enough to do some job, get paid, and get back! You'd just screw it up. You ain't wise like them yet."

"I can do magic, too! And I'm educated!" Tanya shouted loud enough to make two cats retreat under the couch. "I got my GED."

The queen frowned while she chewed, chins bouncing. She never should have let the girl take that correspondence course. It had made her even more uppity. It was time to put the royal foot down. "I forbids it. You'll be queen someday, so you need to learn 'bout how to be a proper type ruler, meanin' you ain't goin' nowhere."

Tanya screeched in frustration and stomped off. She slammed the door to her room hard enough to shake the whole trailer.

It had taken another hour for her momma to fall asleep on her recliner. Tanya waited until the snores were nice, even, and loud before sliding out the window. She'd snuck out many nights before. She knew every bar from here to Tupelo, and had danced on most of them.

But this time was different. Tanya wasn't coming back. It was time to make it big. She was sick of the Enchanted Forest, sick of her Queenliness always bossing her around, and bored out of her mind. She was too big for the trailer park, and she was going to show them. She had a backpack full of clothes, spell fixings, a pocket full of money (mostly stolen), an iPod with every single Eminem song on it, and her dreams.

She'd heard the legends. Elves used to be beautiful, immortal and magical. The elder Vartinian used to tell the youngsters the stories. Their people had been brave, and had fought mighty wars against the fearsome orcs and the evil fey. It was impossible to imagine her mighty ancestors living in the Enchanted Forest and being happy. She'd heard about other elves across the sea. They had to be cooler than her stupid relatives. She watched a lot of TV. She knew what was out there.

It had been on one of her weekend *scouting* trips that she'd finally come to the realization that her destiny lay outside the Enchanted Forest. After hitchhiking to Tupelo, because she'd heard about an awesome kegger, Tanya had come across a magical shrine where a mystical hero had been born. She still wore one of the great one's holy symbols on a chain around her neck, a solemn reminder that a legend could come from humble beginnings, plus she thought her Elvis Presley medallion looked wicked cool in her cleavage when she wore one of her low-cut tops.

If a human could go on to become a god, what amazing things could an elf of the royal line accomplish? All sorts of badass stuff, that's what. But first she needed a ticket out of the Enchanted Forest, and by royal decree, Elves were not allowed out without leave. Sure, the queen looked the other way for Tanya's sneaking out, as she knew that youngsters needed to blow off steam, but leaving for good would be different. Momma would be sure to send the trackers after her.

So she needed to hatch a scheme that would let her go in a way that the queen wouldn't dare drag her back.

The getaway plan had been in her head for quite some time. The idea had started a couple years back when she'd watched some Hunters come to bug Momma for information. Tanya had always found humans interesting, especially the cute boys, but most elves hated their cousins because they were squishy, mean-tempered, and short-lived. But they respected the Hunters. The Monster Hunters put boot to ass on a regular basis, and even the snottiest elf in the Enchanted Forest had to admit that they were the real deal, so fearsome that they even owned a tribe of vicious orc barbarians, let free only to eat the babies of their enemies.

There had been a funny looking red-bearded one, a big ugly with a scar face, a black guy with badass dreadlocks, and a blonde girl with attitude, so pretty that she had left Tanya jealous enough to start bleaching her own hair. All of them except for the ugly one had come back the next year, and Tanya had eavesdropped again. These people had adventures *and* they made serious bank. They were feared and respected, riding to battle on a flying death-machine driven by their insane orc slaves, and living in a mysterious palace known only as the Compound. Now that was living large.

Summoning up all her courage, Tanya had confronted the Hunters as they were leaving and had asked what it took to become one of them. They didn't laugh at her at all. The one with the red beard had seemed a little confused, but had started to give her a serious answer, until Momma had hit her with a well-aimed bunny slipper and ordered her back into the trailer. The slipper had nearly put out her eye, but it was worth it. Just the fact that they hadn't laughed at her told her that there was no reason an elf couldn't join up.

When she'd overheard Momma saying that she was going to assign that idiot Elmo to do a little job for the king of the Hunters, she knew that she'd have to move quick. She was a much better diviner than Elmo was, probably twice as good when he was liquored up, which was most of the time.

After sneaking out the window, Tanya had hunkered down behind the back of the trailer and waited. Most elves slept in pretty late, so if the Hunters were coming in the morning, then she'd have a good chance of reaching them first. Momma wouldn't dare send the trackers after her if she was working for the Hunters. Tanya congratulated herself on the brilliance of her plan.

It was getting cold, early winter, but she'd worn a nice coat. It was a letterman's jacket from the Boonville Blue Devils, lifted off a stupid human. Human boys were even dumber than their elven counterparts, but she did appreciate the muscles on the ones that played football. Luckily it didn't take too long for her ride to show up. Even with her earpieces in, she still heard the truck arrive. It was a huge, black pickup truck with a winch on the front and a shell over the back. It had to be the Hunters. This was perfect. Everyone else was asleep. She turned off the *8 Mile* soundtrack, grabbed her backpack, and ran over to rap her knuckles against the window.

It took a second but the window rolled down and the human behind the wheel gave her a funny look. If she were hitchhiking this was normally when she would have leaned forward so the driver could see down her shirt, but that didn't seem

like the *professional* thing to do. She had an act to keep up. "Heya," Tanya said, standing perfectly straight. "You the Hunter?"

"I am," he said politely, tipping the brim of his ball cap. It had a green happy face on it. If he was an elf he'd have been in his mid-hundreds, but Tanya figured that made him about forty in human years. Wearing a really old leather jacket, he seemed bulky by elf standards, but probably lean compared to most of the humans she knew. He wasn't handsome at all, kind of plain with a hard face, like someone who spent a lot of time outdoors, and eyes that seemed to look right through her. Elves had blue eyes too, but his were the color of ice and just as cold. This was the kind of man who made his living face-punching monsters to death. "I'm here to see the queen."

"She's probably gonna sleep until about noon," Tanya answered, thinking quickly. "She went on a real bender last night. I'm talking like a gallon of Thunderbird! She didn't want to be disturbed. So she sent me to meet you. I'm your diviner."

The Hunter seemed a little surprised. "You're Elmovarian? The master tracker?"

"Of course," she answered proudly, the human hadn't been expecting a babe. Tanya prided herself on being the hottest of all the elves in the trailer park. "That's my full elf name. Whenever I work with humans I let them call me Tanya."

"I'm Earl Harbinger," the Hunter said. "Ain't you a little young?"

"I'm an elf. I'm older than I look." Which was true, Tanya had been able to successfully buy beer when she was only fourteen with her fake ID. Momma had always said she was an early bloomer. She was twenty-two now, which was positively *ancient* by human female standards. "Besides, I'm the best tracker in the Enchanted Forest." Tanya didn't hesitate. She went for the gold. This was her ticket out of this dump. "All righty then, we better get going, I'm guessing you've got lots of things to murder." Not wanting to give him time to think about it, she immediately walked around the front of the truck to the passenger side. She held her breath until he unlocked the door. She threw her pack in the back seat and climbed in the front. "Okay, let's go."

The Hunter shrugged and started the engine. "Seatbelt," he suggested. She complied. Tanya was terribly nervous, but Momma didn't come lumbering out of the trailer. Nobody raised the alarm. The trackers didn't come out with their sawed off shotguns and compound bows to massacre the Hunter for kidnapping the royal heir. They crossed the threshold of the Enchanted Forest and then they were free.

"Where're we headed?" Tanya asked, eager for adventure.

"Indiana," Harbinger answered.

The princess of the elves was intrigued. "Ooohh. That sounds exciting."

The Monster Hunter just watched the road. "Uh huh."

Exszrsd Hgth Frhnzld Wrst was Uzbek Orcish for *Stab-Fighting Warrior of Righteous Vindication*, but he was just Edward to his friends. And today, Edward had been asked to stay in the van. So he sat in the van, listening to AM talk radio and sharpening his swords.

Outside the van, the Hunters were preparing for battle. They would call when he was needed. Then Edward would kill things, and all would be well.

His older brother and clan leader, Skippy, had asked him to come along to support their adopted clan on this mission. Clan mother and holy woman, Gretchen, had dreamed a dream that had told her that Edward's life skill would be needed today to save their friends. All *urks* were born with a life skill. Edward's skill consisted of stabbing things, so any day that required Edward's skill was truly a good day to be an *urk*.

Skippy, or *Skull Crushing Battle Hand of Fury*, as Mom had called him (strange humans, with their insistence on short names), was still busy fixing the MHI helicopter from when the giant tree beast had knocked it out of the New Zealand sky. So the Hunters were going to drive in cars, which were slow, lumbering contraptions compared to his brother's helicopter. So when the Hunters had assembled to leave on their latest quest, Edward had just showed up with a bag full of stabbing and slashing implements and tossed it into the back of the van, which had created an awkward situation. The Hunters had gently tried to turn him away.

That had never happened before and their actions had confused Edward. The Hunters always seemed to love when Edward stabbed things for them. Oh no, they assured him. They loved Edward, but they had warned him, this mission required the presence of an *elf*.

So that's why the Hunters didn't want him. Elves were disgusting, foul, loathsome creatures. As tuskless as a human, but way more uppity about it. Elves and orcs had been at war since the beginning of the world. Edward would rather eat his own sword than have to put up with an elf, but Gretchen had been adamant that Edward needed to be present today or the Hunters would get in trouble. So when he'd still insisted on going, they'd made him promise to stay in the van out of sight. Harb Anger was sleeping in from being a werewolf, so they'd have him pick up the elf.

So Edward kept out of sight, carefully running a whetstone down his sword while listening to Rush Limbaugh on the radio. Edward did not understand human ways, but he loved their talk radio and news programs almost as much as he loved their heavy metal. When he was not practicing his stab-killing, Edward watched the news. Owen Zastava Pitt, Brother of the Great War Chief, had laughed and proclaimed that Edward was a "Fox news-junkie". Edward was pleased with this title, for he did love the human news channel, and not just because foxes were the most delicious of all mammals, which was the whole reason he'd started watching that particular channel in the first place. Anything named after the favorite animal to hunt with his bare hands was okay by him.

Tanya managed to fall asleep on the drive. At first she had only been pretending, snoring theatrically because the less she talked to Harbinger the longer it would take for him to figure out that he'd picked up the wrong elf. Sure, she figured she was an amazingly good diviner, being of the royal line and all, but she'd never actually done anything with magic outside of the Enchanted Forest. She wasn't worried though. How hard could it be?

She woke up when Harbinger pulled into a gas station. The sun was high and annoyingly bright. She'd been out for hours. Blinking, she stumbled out of the truck and headed for the convenience store. Before leaving the bathroom, she

reapplied her makeup and fixed her hair in front of the mirror, because she wanted to make a good impression on her new co-workers. Then she flirted with the cashier, shoplifted a couple bags of Corn Nuts, and left. When she got back, Harbinger was waiting.

“You forgot to pay for those.”

“Oh, my bad!” Tanya exclaimed. “I must’ve been sleep walking still.” She hurried back in and paid for breakfast with actual money. The boss Hunter sure didn’t miss much. She was going to have to play her cards real careful with him.

Harbinger started talking as soon as they got back on the highway. “We got the tip yesterday. Some locals were tearing down an old factory and must have uncovered it inside. Some of the workers got killed. Local sheriff investigated, and he had some dealings with MHI a long time ago, so when they found the anomaly, they knew who to call.”

Anomaly? That sure did sound all sorts of *sciencey*. Tanya figured that a real smart professional-type elf would ask all the right questions, but not the stupid questions that would make them sound like they really didn’t know what they were doing. “What’re we dealing with?” That seemed like a happy medium.

“The creatures haven’t been identified yet, but it sounds like they’re coming out of a pocket dimension. That’s why I called your queen and asked for a diviner.”

“Pocket dimension...” She racked her brain and drew a blank. “Yeah, I get those all the time.”

Harbinger scowled. He seemed to make that face a *lot*. “I’ve only come across four in my entire life and I’ve been doing this for a long time.”

Tanya felt a momentary stab of panic. “Well, all the time, relatively speaking.” Good. That sounded vague. She tried to change the subject. “What kind of monsters do you think they are?”

“The closest teams were already booked, so my guys didn’t get there until earlier today, but now that I’ve got Hunters on site, hopefully by the time we get there they’ll have figured it out. We’ll play it by ear. If the monsters are a pain to deal with, that’s where you come in. You can find the anchor and just break the tether.”

That was a whole bunch of words that apparently didn’t mean what she thought they meant. “No problemo,” Tanya answered, not really sure what he expected her to do.

Harbinger didn’t seem too talkative after that. Tanya still couldn’t remember anything about pocket dimensions, anchors, or tethers, so she pulled out her cell phone. It was a desperate gamble, but Tanya was an elf of decisive action. “Gotta check in... Queen’s orders.”

Ilrondelia, Queen of the Elves, stabbed listlessly at her bowl of cornflakes and bacon. Tanya had been nowhere to be found. Fool girl had probably run off, screwin’ around again, so she’d been forced to call for one of her other subjects to make breakfast. Elmo was the elves’ best tracker, and he had just been waiting around for the Hunters to give him a ride anyways, so she’d drafted him to cook her bacon. It was all soggy. Proper bacon stayed crispy in milk.

Elmo was a mighty fine tracker, but terrible cook. It wasn’t like Harbinger to be late, so she’d ordered Elmo to vacuum the royal trailer instead of just standing

around. The cat hair kept plugging up the vacuum, so it was taking him awhile and the noise was making it hard to watch TV.

Suddenly, the vacuum stopped. The queen looked up from her soaps to see what the matter was. "You ain't done. That carpet don't look clean to me!"

"Sorry, majesty," he answered blearily as he fumbled around in his pockets. As usual, Elmo was hung-over. "It's my phone."

The queen didn't like those fancy cellular phones, too much communicating wasn't good for an elf, but she'd bought a few of the prepaid ones at the 7-11 for the elves that had to take care of important outside business. The royal family had all got some too, because royalty always got the good stuff. "Well, answer it!" It might be Harbinger, and she didn't want to miss out on any of that nice, under-the-table, MHI cash.

"Oh... it's a text." Elmo squinted his little beady eyes. The queen was actually surprised that Elmo could read. She hadn't known that about him. Literacy made her suspicious. Elmo started typing with his thumbs, all slow and fumbly, especially when the texter had the shakes. The queen thought that texting was a particularly stupid way to talk. "Well, ain't that funny?" he said.

"What's funny?"

"Tanya's gettin' serious about studyin' our ways." Elmo wiped his nose on the back of his hand and dropped his phone back in his coveralls. "Usually that girl's got her head in the clouds."

"Studyin'? She should'a been cookin' my bacon," the queen said. She went back to her soaps. She'd punish the heir when she got back from... wherever she was. "Hey, where's Tanya at anyways?"

Elmo shrugged. "She didn't say. She wanted to know what a human would call a pocket dee-mention. I told her it's just human talk for an *eskarthi-dor*."

That was the old Elvish word for a portal world. Why in the world would Tanya care about one of those? "Gimmie that thingy," the Queen growled. Elmo handed the phone over. Grumbling, she tried to dial the number, but her fingers were too chubby. "Damn it! Call that fool girl back."

Once she knew that what the Hunters were interested in was an *eskarthi-dor*, her confidence had grown. She'd never actually seen one, but Varty the Elder had taught the young elves about such things before he'd gone on to the Great Trailer Park in the Sky. This was going to be a piece of cake.

Tanya jumped when her phone rang, but it was only Elmo calling her back. She'd downloaded the ringtone of pig's squealing for Elmo, but right then she was wishing she'd downloaded something more professional sounding. She looked over at Harbinger. "Gotta take this. Important elf business."

He didn't so much as take his eyes off the road. "Obviously."

"Hel—"

"*Tanya!* You fool girl! I'm gonna wring your scrawny ne—" Tanya had to hold the phone away from her pointy ear. *Mom?* The Queen had a set of lungs, and when she got to yelling, you could hear her clear over in Corinth. Tanya covered the phone and looked over at Harbinger, but he seemed oblivious to the monarch's fury. "—idiot had to cook my bacon!"

She had to think fast. There was no way she was going back to the Enchanted Forest. If she didn't become an official Monster Hunter on this trip, she was screwed. "Why, yes. Everything is just great here."

"Huh? Get your fool ass back here befo—"

"Yes. Right away."

"Why you talkin' all funny?"

"Everything is fine here," Tanya said. Harbinger had no idea; he was just smoking and flicking the ashes out the window. Her plan was working perfectly; she might as well use the opportunity to build her street cred. She raised her voice so Harbinger could hear her over the wind. "Don't worry. I'll handle that huge infestation of horrible monsters as soon as I get back. Yes. I will be sure to tell them that I am the greatest tracker the Enchanted Forest has ever seen. Thank you."

"Tanya? You been huffin' paint?"

"Thank you. Bye bye." Tanya closed the phone and checked Harbinger's reaction. The Hunter was clueless. *Yes!* She shut her phone off to avoid getting anymore unwanted calls. "Sorry about that, Mr. Harbinger."

"More important elf business?"

"Of course. I'm *super* important."

The queen stared at the phone in her hand. Something was wrong. Tanya had been talking all sorts of weird, and she hadn't even sounded drunk. She mashed redial.

"Hi, this is Tanya!"

"Girl, you better—"

"Ha! Gotcha! Leave a message!" *BEEP.*

Something was terribly wrong.

"Your majesty?" Elmo asked.

"The heir... I think she's been kidnapped!" Somehow a mother just knew these things. This was awful. Horrible! Unthinkable! Someone had taken the heir. "Somebody done stole Tanya!"

Indiana wasn't any more interesting than Mississippi, which was kind of sad if you thought about it. They had arrived in a small town and a police car had been waiting for them at one intersection. The police car had got in front and led them to an old, abandoned factory on the outskirts. There were a bunch of Hunters just kind of chilling, looking all sorts of cool with their fancy armor and guns, just hanging around outside the crumbling old building, but Harbinger had called them a "perimeter" which Tanya filed away as an important sounding term for hanging out.

Harbinger got out and immediately started asking questions, getting answers, and giving orders. This was a man used to being in charge, but not all blustery and yelling like the queen. He didn't need to hit anybody with a thrown shoe. They just did what they were told without arguing because they automatically knew that Harbinger was right. Since Tanya was going to be queen someday herself—if she didn't get disowned for this stunt—she filed that information away. Being all sorts of smart got you more respect than a well aimed bunny slipper.

“Anybody know what we’re dealing with yet?”

“Witnesses couldn’t tell. The only thing we could get from them was that it gave everyone headaches that got close to it. Tracks say quadruped with big claws, probably seven or eight hundred pounds. Lee’s cross referencing the files on that.” It was a girl with dark hair and glasses that answered. “Local police have the place surrounded, but nothing’s moved since we got here. We’ve got another problem, though. Timeline just sped up.”

“Status?”

“Possible hostages. Two children, male, five and seven, were reported as missing yesterday. They were last seen playing around here. We just found kid size footprints, but the tracks lead up to the gate and disappear. I think they’re on the other side.”

“That complicates matters,” Harbinger muttered. “I was hoping we could just blow everything up and collect the parts. Looks like we’re going in.”

A group of Hunters formed a circle around them. Tanya recognized some of them. Harbinger rattled off introductions, but Tanya was so overwhelmed with all the bustle and excitement that she remembered them as Dreadlocks, Blondie, Red Beard, Glasses Girl, Limpy, and the Big Ugly One. When he was done, Harbinger turned to her. “This is Elmovarian, master diviner of the Enchanted Forest.”

Red Beard looked confused. “Aren’t you the princess? Toni? Tawny? Something?”

“Tanya.” Harbinger looked right through her. “What do you mean, *princess*?”

“What? No... Me? That’s crazy talk.” Tanya hadn’t thought through the idea that some of the Hunters might recognize her. Curse her amazing and unforgettable beauty! “You’re thinking of the *other* Tanya.”

“No. I remember you, too,” said Dreadlocks. “Your mom hit you in the face with a bunny slipper for asking how to join MHI.”

“Looked like it hurt,” said Blondie.

Harbinger didn’t seem happy. “Well, that explains some things.”

“No... I...” *Busted*. All of the Hunters were scowling at her now. Scowling was like a default setting on these humans. “Crap. Okay, whatever. Yeah, I’m the princess. So? I’m a way super good diviner.”

“Sure you are,” Harbinger said. “I’m going to have some words with the queen once I take you home. I can’t believe she tried to rip me off. I should have hired a gnome.”

“No, you can’t tell the queen. She doesn’t know I ran away. I’m here on my own. This is like my dream. I want to be a Monster Hunter.”

Blondie whistled. “The queen is going to be pissed.”

All of her carefully laid plans were falling apart. “But, I can totally help!”

“It doesn’t matter anyway. We’re going in after those kids. You’re going to sit your ass in that van and not move until we come out.”

“She can’t go in the van, Earl...” Big Ugly noted. “We’ve got a *you know what* in the van, and I don’t really know if he’d do very good at the whole *rescue* thing. He recognizes Hunters okay, but he says that other humans kind of all look the same to him.”

“He does love decapitating folks.” Harbinger sighed. “Okay, leave Edward in the van. Can’t have her royal highness getting sliced and diced.”

“What’s an Edward?”

“An Edward is somebody you don’t want to mess with, and he really doesn’t like elves,” Harbinger stated. “Now go sit in the truck and eat your stolen Corn Nuts. I don’t have time for your nonsense.”

“I’m not afraid of no Edwards.”

Harbinger stopped, obviously frustrated. “Edward is an orc.” Tanya’s mouth fell open in shock. She looked fearfully at the van. “You give me any more lip and I’ll tell him to baby sit you... Corn Nuts. Now.”

Tanya ran for the truck.

Tanya was really freaking out. Momma was going to murder her. The Hunters were so mad that now she’d never get a job. She couldn’t even show how great she was by breaking the bonds that held the *eskarthi-dor* to the world so it could float away, because there were some stupid human kids inside of it. She still had one last chance. She could try to talk her way out of this, but though that usually worked with Momma, she really didn’t think it would work on somebody like Harbinger. Even though it was a long drive back, and normally her whining could wear down anyone, she had a feeling that would probably just make Harbinger angrier, and if he got too angry he’d probably feed her to MHI’s pet orc.

The worst part was that it was taking *forever*.

The Hunters had gone inside the old factory an hour ago. There hadn’t been a noise out of the place since then. They’d left two Hunters on the outside: Blondie and the one with the bum leg had gone inside the factory with some bazookas and a radio. They were probably there just in case something went wrong in the *eskarthi-dor*.

There was a big radio in Harbinger’s truck. She wondered if she could listen in to see what was going on. It beat being bored. She flipped it on, and luckily she didn’t even need to fiddle with the knobs. It was already tuned in to the Hunter’s frequency.

“—say again, over.” That sounded like Blondie.

“—messing with our heads—“ The other side had a lot of static. “Can’t proceed... —ve to fall back... —the trail out now.”

That didn’t sound good. That sounded like they were running. She didn’t think that Hunters ran from anything.

“This is Holly. Did you find those kids?”

“Negative. Had to retreat.” The other girl was talking.

“This is Lee.” Tanya hadn’t heard Limpy talk before, but from the lack of static she assumed it was one of the Hunters that had stayed Earth-side. “I think I’ve found our creatures. Something called a mind colossus fits the description. Rare and dangerous. You need to get the hell out of there.”

“—rking on it.” There were a series of pops that Tanya had to assume were gunshots.

“They’re telepathic.” Lee sounded really nervous. “They can cause hallucinations, confusion, even insanity.”

“Can we block it?”

“No known way. There’s a note here that they only affect humans. Earl?”

Harbinger stopped shooting long enough to talk on the radio. "No dice. My head feels like it's gonna explode, same as everybody else. Looks like I'm human enough."

I'm not human at all.

Tanya pulled out her cell phone and turned it back on. She had to wait a minute for the phone to power back up and find a signal. She found MOMMA on her address book. The queen was probably going to be asleep or too lazy to get up to answer the phone, but she had to try. Surprisingly, she picked up on the first ring.

Momma sounded even more breathless than usual. "Tanya! Where you at, girl?"

"No time to talk. This is important. Real quick, what's a mind colossus?"

"Huh? A what? Have you been stolen?"

"No, but I need to know if a mind colossus can hurt an elf brain or not."

Momma sputtered. "Why you need to know something like that for?"

"Because there's one here right now and I need to know if it's gonna fry my brain or not is why, jeez. Quit being so nosy."

Momma screamed at somebody in the background. "Tanya's been kidnapped by fey! Drive faster!"

Momma had *left* the trailer park? That was impossible. "Wait, where are you?"

"I'm coming to save ya, baby!"

Oh shit. The queen never left the Enchanted Forest except to go to Walmart, and Indiana was a whole lot farther away than Walmart. She was in so much trouble. "Uh... Okay... Cool. Now on the monster thingy, does it hurt elf brains?"

"They're called *blargs*. Fey bred them to hunt humans long time back for some war. Shouldn't hurt no elf brains, but they got claws like nobody's business, rip you right up."

The Hunters were in danger. There were stupid but innocent human kids in need of rescuing. The blarg wouldn't be able to use its magic on her, but it could still hurt her. She needed wisdom. Tanya pulled her Elvis Presley medallion, set it spinning, watched the sparkles, and asked herself, *what would the King do?*

That was easy. He'd kick some fey ass, show MHI that he was cool, be the best elf ever, and never have to live in the stupid trailer park again. So that's what she'd do, too.

She curled her fingers around the holy symbol and made a fist. "A little less conversation, a lot more *action*."

Momma was confused. "Huh?"

"Nothing, Momma..." She didn't know much about fighting monsters. She could probably borrow a Hunter's gun, since like all elves she could shoot good enough to poach deer, but beyond that she was pretty much clueless. The meanest thing she'd ever tangled with had been a raccoon that had somehow gotten into the trailer, and even though it had put up an *epic* fight before she'd brained it with a frying pan, this would probably be much harder. She would probably need some muscle for this... That thought gave her an idea, even though the idea was frankly terrifying. "Can a *blarg* hurt an orc brain?"

Edward was listening to both radios at the same time, Sean Hannity on one, his adopted tribe of Monster Hunters on the other, and it sounded like it was time

to fulfill Gretchen's latest prophecy. Edward did not know what a mind colossus was, nor did he particularly care. It would either be something he could kill or it would kill him. Either way, it would be a glorious day to be an *urk*.

He carefully placed the leather straps over his shoulders and cinched the buckles tight. The scabbards rattled as he adjusted them to make sure his swords were perfectly placed. He was carrying two short *urkish* swords on his back, two curved daggers and six small throwing knives on his belt, a push dagger hanging from a cord around his neck, four folding knives in various pockets, and a Swiss Army knife that Trip Jones had given him for his birthday. Edward had no use for that one, but found the corkscrew and scissors fascinating. The thing they were talking about on the radio sounded big, so Edward took the mighty two-handed war ax out of his bag and pulled the leather hood off its giant razor head. He chuckled approvingly. This would be fun.

Edward never used guns, though he'd tried. He had nothing against them, but his gifts for bladed combat just did not extend to human guns, which were all complicated and noisy. It was kind of like how Skippy could fly a helicopter but couldn't drive a car without crashing. Basically Edward was a terrible shot.

There was a knock on the back door of the van. There were many humans present not worthy to witness *urk* perfection, so Edward reached for his mask and goggles. He didn't get to them in time before the door was flung open.

It was a girl. She saw his face and screamed. He saw her pointy ears and bellowed in surprise.

The elf regained her composure first. "Orc! Your Hunter masters need you. I summon you to battle!" Confused, Edward lifted his ax and pointed at himself, then at her. "*No!*" the elf shrieked. "Not me! The monster. Go battle the monster!"

His first inclination was to just lop off her peroxide-colored head. The clan ancestors had always taught that the only good elf was a dead elf (and also, coincidentally, that dead elves made great holiday decorations), but Edward hesitated, because he did not want to upset the Harb Anger. Edward had never actually seen an elf before. He didn't know if any of his clan had. This one was kind of scrawny. Not very impressive at all, really.

"Come on, what are you waiting for?" She moved her hands about like she was trying to shoo him out of the van. "You guys are supposed to go berserk with blood lust. You call that berserk? You're just sitting there. Are you going to go into a killing frenzy or not?"

That was the idea before you showed up. He put on his mask and reluctantly got out of the van. He didn't talk much to non-*urks* because his English was rough, and Skippy was the one that was smooth and good with human words, but he tried anyway. "Me... Edward."

"That's more like it. Okay, cool. Now let's go kick that blarg's ass. I'm Tanya."

This was certainly awkward. *Gnrwlz*, god of war, commanded that he should kill all elves, but the Harb Anger would want him to be polite, and that meant no decapitations. Tanya was making this complicated, but at least she hadn't tried to steal his soul with her foul elf magic. If he was lucky, the monster would eat her first, then he could kill the monster. Everybody would be happy. It would be like killing two foxes with one swing.

Talking to the insane orc barbarian killer had been the hardest single thing Tanya had ever done in her life. By some miracle, he hadn't immediately cut her ears off for his elf ear necklace that Momma had taught all orcs had, so she was calling it a win. Maybe if she got lucky, the monster would get mortally wounded, *then* kill the orc. That would sure simplify matters.

She led the way into the old factory. The place was rusty, falling apart, with puddles of water standing on the concrete floor. There were huge holes in the roof that beams of sunlight streamed through. Big human machines were slowly melting back into the ground. Except for the blarg that had been hidden underneath this place forever, the only other residents seemed to be pigeons.

They found the Hunters at the far end of the building. A brick wall had been broken down recently, and behind it was a plain old door. The Hunters were gathered around that door and pointing guns in its direction so it was obvious where the problem was. Most of the Hunters were out of breath and dripping sweat, which was odd since it was really chilly in the shade of the old factory's walls. The ones that had been on the other side all looked like they were fighting an Elmo-sized hangover and rubbing their temples.

Tanya gathered up her courage. "Okay. Y'all can relax. Me and the orc have got this one. That there's a *blarg* nest. Its magic will screw humans up, but it can't hurt elves or orcs."

Harbinger glanced her way. "You've got to be shitting me... Edward?"

She looked to the orc. Edward just shrugged, as if to say, *I guess*. At least the horrific barbarian lunatic had her back. She smiled at Harbinger. "See? Told ya so."

"Those kids are still alive, Earl," the girl with glasses said. "But if she could get them out, then we can blow this place to pieces."

"No way. It's too dangerous, princess. I'm not going to have the queen yelling at me because you got stupid," Harbinger said with finality. Tanya gritted her teeth and suppressed the scream of rage. She was not used to being told no. Harbinger then addressed the orc. "On the other hand, Ed, you think you can get those kids out?"

The orc's voice sounded like a clothes dryer filled with rocks. "Yes..."

"All right. Remember the little pink fleshy ones are the *children*. Don't hurt them. The big green fucker? If you can kill. Got it?" The orc just grunted and patted the head of his giant ax tenderly. "That'll do. About two hundred yards straight ahead you'll find a clearing. Owen, open the door."

Big Ugly lifted an enormous gun with one hand and grabbed the doorknob with the other. Everybody else aimed their guns too. Big Ugly nodded at Edward then jerked the door open. Tanya gasped. According to where they were inside the building, the door should have opened into a space about the size of a broom closet. Instead she was looking at a vast, dark, scary forest. But the trees were all bulgy, with big vines hanging off them, and something was screeching like a monkey in the background. It was like looking at a Travel Channel show about jungles, only it was in a bricked off broom closet in Indiana.

Red Beard was standing next to her. "No matter how long I do this," he said, "There's always something new and freaky."

“Clear!” shouted glasses girl as she peered into the jungle through a rifle scope.
“Go get them, Ed.”

Edward was undeterred by the sight of the mysterious jungle. Clenching his ax, he walked toward the doorway. That was one brave orc, or maybe orcs were just too dumb to understand fear, but either way Edward was about to go be a hero and Tanya was going to live the rest of her life in the trailer park.

She had to do something, and do it quick. Glancing around, she noticed a bunch of equipment cases that the Hunters had brought in. On top of one was a big bolt action rifle. It didn't look too different from the one that Elder Varty had taught her to shoot squirrels with for dinner. The rifle had a leather sling with loops filled with giant bullets. It was her only chance.

“What would Elvis Presley do?” Tanya whispered.

Red Beard had heard her. “Probably a lot of drugs? Why?”

Edward was walking into the jungle. He disappeared behind some big round leaves. The Hunters were covering him. Tanya snatched up the rifle, which was much heavier than it looked, and she ran after the orc as fast as she could. It was probably better that way because she didn't have time to think about how stupid it was to randomly cross into another dimension.

“What? Wait! Grab her!” Harbinger shouted, but it was too late. Big Ugly reached for her and snagged one sleeve of her letterman's jacket, but elves are way quicker than humans so Tanya just shrugged out of the coat, caught the rifle, and just kept on running. Big Ugly made it a few steps after her before the *blarg's* magic hit him in the brain like a hammer and he went to his knees with a shout.

Harbinger was yelling after her but Tanya just pushed her way through the vines and kept going. It really wasn't much worse than kudzu once she got into it, and elves were very light on their feet. Even if it wasn't for the telepathic mind attacks there was no way a big lumbering human would be able to catch up to her.

I did it! She stopped to catch her breath. There was no sound of pursuit. She'd lost them! Then Tanya looked around, realized she could only see a few feet in each direction, that there was a giant fey creature somewhere ahead, and thought that she might have maybe bit off more than she could chew this time.

She screamed when something black materialized right in front of her. She raised the big rifle, but the black shape caught the barrel in one hand. Tanya breathed again when she realized it was Edward. The orc leaned in and put one finger to his mask and made a *shhhh* noise.

“Don't you shush me,” Tanya whispered. “I know what I'm doing.”

ROOOAAAARRRRR.

Tanya almost leapt out of her skin at the sound of the *blarg*. She hoisted the rifle and mashed the butt against her shoulder, but nothing came out of the trees to eat her. “That sounded huge!” she hissed. Edward held out his hands as far apart as they would go, like a fisherman talking about the biggest catch ever. “Yeah. That is big.”

The orc jerked his head. *This way*. He was even quicker through the vines than an elf, and Tanya struggled to keep up. It was really hot inside the jungle dimension, and within minutes Tanya's shirt was sticking to her. Up ahead, there was a clearing, just like Glasses Girl had said there would be.

What Glasses Girl, or any of the other Hunters for that matter, couldn't have known was that the clearing was also the center anchor point for the entire *eskarthi-dor*. Tanya could see it, though, clear as day. This place was ancient, not like human ancient, but really ancient, like when the fey used to hunt humans for sport. This bubble was a leftover from those days, and apparently this *blarg* had been stuck here the whole time. No wonder it was so damn cranky.

The monster was stomping back and forth, angry as Momma after the time the pixies stole her credit card number and racked up all those long distance phone bills. However this monster was bigger than Momma, which was really saying something. It looked like a muscular human on the top half, but at the waist it turned into a giant lizard with four big lizard legs and a long whipping tail. It was bright green with black spots. The head was human shaped, but it was hard to tell with all those other brains growing out of it. Momma said that the fey loved to stick different critters together, and it turned out they were just as gross in person as Momma had made them sound.

The *blarg* saw her and turned. She could feel the old magic pouring off that pile of pulsing green brains, but they had been designed to mess up humans, not her kind. No wonder the Hunters had been hurting. This thing really packed a wallop. When its magic didn't floor her, the *blarg* charged. Tanya hadn't even realized that she had raised the rifle. The sights were wobbling like crazy. Her arms were shaking because the gun was so heavy. She pulled the trigger but nothing happened. She pulled harder. Still nothing. She screamed in frustration as the monster galloped toward her. Tanya turned to run, but it was too late.

The monster was too fast. One lizard leg swatted her. She hit the ground hard and lay there, wondering about all the bright lights going off inside her head. Her life flashed before her eyes, but it was a pretty boring life, with the highlights being keggers, a few concerts, and that one time cousin Buford had built a potato cannon and they wound up shooting frogs out of it to watch them hit the side of the overpass. She'd never been a Hunter. She'd never done anything like the adventurous elves of old. She was going to die, and she'd never accomplished anything. Blinking her way back to consciousness, she saw a giant claw descending toward her throat, and she screamed her pretty little head off.

But the claw came off in a flash and went flying into the jungle. Bright orange blood poured out of the stump and splattered Tanya in the face. "Gross!"

The orc came out of nowhere, swinging that giant ax like it weighed nothing. Edward had saved her life! The *blarg* reared back, slashing at him, but he dodged the attack and planted his ax square in the monster's soft underbelly. It fell over and Edward lost the ax, but that didn't stop him. Two swords zipped out faster than Momma's switchblade and it was a whirl of silver and black as Edward went to town.

Tanya watched in awe. Edward moved like a kung-fu movie on fast forward. The monster had to be five times his size, but the orc didn't seem to care. He was positively nonchalant, and he took it apart, piece by piece. It was raining fluorescent orange blood and Edward was as cool as a cucumber. He was as cold as ice. He was as cool as *Elvis*.

But even as quick as Edward was, that was a whole lot of monster, and it finally managed to tag him with one of its human sized hands. His clothes ripped, knives

went flying, and Edward was sent rolling across the dirt to end up by her sneakers. The *blarg* roared, one of its brains hanging off and dripping goop, and it came right at them.

This time it was Tanya's turn to save the day. She rolled over, scooped up the rifle, sort of aimed it, and pulled the trigger. Sadly, there was still no boom. "Stupid piece of—" Edward reached over and flipped the rifle's safety lever to fire for her. "Oh... thanks."

This time when she pulled the trigger, the gun went off with the loudest *BOOM* she'd ever heard. It kicked her shoulder like a horse on steroids. She squealed and dropped the rifle. "Son of a bitch! That hurt!" But she'd hit the monster! The *blarg* made it a few more feet before it toppled over. She'd blown half its head off, and judging from the mess, the outside brains just did the magic, the inside brains worked just like everything else. And since those brains were sprayed all over the clearing...

"Yay! I'm a Monster Hunter!" Edward gave her a thumbs up. She got to her feet, rubbing her tender shoulder, and picked up the rifle. It had *.416 Rigby* engraved on the side. Whatever that was, it sure did pack a punch.

Edward got to his feet and pulled off the shredded remains of his shirt. There was a big bloody scratch on his side and he used the rags to apply pressure. "Dayum..." Tanya couldn't help but stare, because Edward was seriously the most buffed thing she'd ever seen. He made her favorite football players look like dainty ballerinas. He didn't just have a six pack abs, his six pack had six packs. Edward may have been an odd grayish-green color, but homeboy was *chiseled*. He went over to the *blarg*, yanked his ax out of its stinky guts, and caught her looking. Edward didn't so much as bat an eye. He was all like, *This? Whatever*. Or at least that's what she figured he would have said, if he'd bothered to talk.

Damn. He was *cool*.

She snapped out of his orcish spell, darn all those distracting muscles, and got back to Monster Hunting business. They had to rescue those human brats. Edward must have thought the same thing, since he'd already spotted the hole they were being kept in. The kids were alive and whining, probably being kept around for a snack later, and Edward begun pulling them out.

Tanya looked around. She could feel the impressive magic here and it was really too bad that she hadn't been able to use her skills. She could totally have wrecked this place. That would have impressed Harbinger even more than her blowing some stupid *blarg*'s head off.

There was a sudden rumble. "What was that?" she asked.

Edward was dragging the kids along behind. He stopped and listened, then he lifted the ax. "More... for fight..." The sounds were coming from all around them now. The ground shifted under her feet and Tanya had to step back as the sleeping *blarg* buried beneath awoke. Mounds of dirt were shifting all over the clearing. There were dozens of them. She fumbled with the bolt handle until she managed to reload the elephant rifle.

"He he he..." Edward had a very unnerving laugh. "Pinheads." He actually sounded excited.

They could never make it through that many monsters. Green claws burst from the soil. She was going to have to use her magic to try to break the pocket

dimension. This whole place was going to fall apart when she did that. She was terrified, but she needed to think of something sufficiently badass to say like a Monster Hunter totally should... She couldn't think of anything, though. In her defense it was her first day on the job.

Edward had a human child bouncing under each arm. He'd left his ax buried in one monster's head, left one sword in a monster's belly, broke the other over a monster's head, and had managed to run through most of his knives. If he'd known there were going to be that many monsters he would have brought more than seventeen weapons.

The door was just ahead. The elf girl was running along behind. She kept shooting the big gun. She was also not a very good shot, but at least she was making lots of noise. Battle was always better with lots of noise. Her war cries were too high pitched though. If she was going to be a proper warrior, she was going to have to work on that.

Edward was torn. The elf hadn't died, and strangely enough, that made him happy... But then again, he hadn't liked humans much either until MHI had adopted his clan. She hadn't even tried to steal his soul *once*, and she'd saved his life by shooting a few monsters. *Gnrwlz* was probably displeased, but Edward had killed many monsters today, so they were even.

The door was open and sunlight was coming through. Which was good, because the little world full of monsters was coming apart and with all the trees falling down, he might not have found his way. Harb Anger, Brother of Great War Chief, and Trip Jones were in the doorway shouting for him. There was a scream from the elf, though this one was not a battle cry, and Edward turned to see that a monster had caught her by the foot and was dragging her away.

Sadness. Edward had started liking the elf. Edward reached the door and shoved the human children at the Hunters. You know what? Edward decided that maybe he did like that elf just enough to not let her get eaten. *Gnrwlz* could suck it. Edward would save her, too. He turned and ran back through the shifting dirt and collapsing trees. He was out of proper *urk* weapons, but he still had something stabby, and that would do.

Edward leapt over Tanya, landed on the monster's wide lizard back, and scrambled up to its globular head. He drove Trip Jones' Swiss Army corkscrew deep into the monster's head, twisted it in, then ripped out a plug of skull. The monster gurgled and fell, making the Swiss Army knife one of the best presents ever. Edward jumped off, scooped up Tanya in his arms and ran for the doorway as the world around him collapsed into oblivion.

"I like her," Red Beard, or Milo it turned out he was called, was saying. "She's certainly energetic."

"Crazy is more like it. Not that that's necessarily a resume killer with this outfit," Harbinger answered. "Skippy's people won't like it."

"Ed said he'd vouch for her," Milo pointed out.

Harbinger shook his head. "Hell... Trip hired a troll. How much worse could this be? Oh, look, pretty-pretty princess has decided to join us."

Tanya woke up in the arms of an orc barbarian. Now *that* would have really freaked Momma out... Orcs were like the ultimate *bad boys*, and there was something kind of exciting about that. She was on the ground and he was kneeling next to her. Edward's goggled head was tilted to the side, like he was saying, *I got you, baby. Don't worry. I'm here.* Or maybe not. It was kind of hard to tell. When Edward saw that she was conscious he unceremoniously dropped her and wandered off.

"I got a headache," Tanya said. The last time she'd felt this way was when she'd got into Elmo's moonshine. "So, how was that? Pretty awesome, huh?"

Harbinger sat down on the edge of an old piece of machinery and lit a cigarette. He took his time responding. "Not bad. Edward said you did okay. Were you actually telling the truth for once when you said your dream was to be a Hunter?"

"It is. It really is, I swear. I'll work hard. I want to be like you guys. I want to be *somebody*," Tanya cried. "I'll be the best Hunter you've ever seen."

Harbinger sighed. "I may regret this..." He took out a business card and wrote on the back of it. "This is the next Newbie class. And just because you're royalty doesn't mean you get any special treatment. Lie to me again and you're toast. Got it?"

"Serious? I can be a Hunter?" Tanya started to tear up. "I can't believe this. I've still gotta tell Momma."

Harbinger looked to the opposite end of the factory. "And speaking of which..."

"*Tanya!*" The whole factory shook from the power of the queen's voice and the thunder of her slippers. "*Tanyalthus Enderminon!* I'm gonna wring your scrawny neck! Comin' all the way up here, thinkin' you been kidnap stolen, and you done run off playin' Hunter!" Momma was huffing and red faced. This was the most exercise she'd gotten in a really long time. "Sorry bout this," she told Harbinger.

"It's fine. In fact, I'd be interested in hiring Tanya for some other work."

"Really?" she asked suspiciously. "Pay good?"

"Real good. I'll be in touch."

"Better be good. You pay extra for the royal line!" The queen came over and grabbed Tanya by the end of one pointy ear and hauled her up. "We're gettin' you home right now, young lady!"

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Okay! I'm coming!" Despite the aches and pains, being in torn and filthy clothing, and the embarrassment of being dragged by the ear, Tanya was happy as could be. She was going to be a *Hunter*. She still needed to talk Momma into it, but scary as Momma was, she was no monster. Elvis had smiled on her.

"You's in so much trouble." Momma dragged her out to the old Buick station wagon in the parking lot. Elmo and several other elves were sitting in the car, giving the evil eye to Edward, who had wandered back to the van. It was an uneasy truce, only because of the presence of the Hunters.

"Hang on a sec." Tanya broke out of Momma's grasp and ran over to Edward. The elves gasped, but they didn't dare make a move. Edward tilted his head to the side, confused. There was a notebook in the back of the van. Tanya grabbed a pen, wrote on the paper, then tore it out and handed it over to Edward.

"TAAANYAAAA!" the queen of the Elves screeched.

Edward looked at the phone number and scratched his head.

“Coming, Mother.” Tanya flounced back to the car, only turning long enough to pantomime talking on the phone and to mouth the words, “*Call me.*” The elves piled into the station wagon and it roared off in a cloud of oily smoke. The queen could be heard shouting until the car was out of view.

Edward carefully folded the piece of paper and put it in his pocket for safe keeping.

