

Goblin's Gift

Jerome followed the cyan wildflowers that led to cobalt and dug his mineshaft. He wasn't aware that he freed a tiny, misshapen figure with midnight blue skin: a kobold. Buried deep in the earth, swallowing ore into her intestines, soaking it into her blood until it wholly consumed her, even took her name. Cobalt: the goblin metal. He wasn't aware that she followed him home and became his shadow. She murmured her secrets to him in the dark, guiding his shovel to greater concentrations of ore, deeper and more dangerous underground. She watched Jerome grow his family, feed and protect them, whisper to his wife Therese his dream that their son Denis might have a different future. She stayed with Jerome as he hunched his body into the narrow shaft until his spine became crooked, absorbed the ore into his skin until it took on a bluish tinge, breathed the dust into his lungs until rasping punctuated every sentence.

The kobold sat by the bare cinderblock wall while Jerome dug a spot of dirt from under his fingernail. He checked himself in the cloudy mirror over the sink as he took his shirt off the wire hanger where it had been drying since he rinsed it the night before. Denis mimicked his father, slipping his arms into the sleeves of his own school uniform. The kobold noticed a blue cast—too faint for normal eyes to detect—to Denis's face contrasted against the crisp white polyester.

Sometimes children, or those in extreme emotional states, could see her. She usually hid from them, but for a time she had revealed herself to Denis, and he had called her friend. His laughter had quieted the buzzing in her ears from the cobalt electrifying her nerves. As he grew, she faded from his vision and became imaginary to him, but she pretended he could still play with her, and it soothed her gnawing loneliness. She even convinced herself that he could still sense her when he paused for no apparent reason.

Denis chewed his lips and shifted from one foot to the other until the words finally burst out of his mouth.

“Father, tomorrow I want to come to the mine with you.”

Jerome’s mouth tightened, spreading across his cheeks and down into his chin, pulling the corners of his lips into a frown. He knelt and took Denis’s shoulders in his scarred hands.

“The mine’s not for you—don’t ask me again.”

“I’m not a boy anymore. Look how strong I am.” Denis expanded his chest and flexed his arms.

“So I see.” Jerome’s face softened as he deflated Denis by tickling his stomach. “That’s why I rely on you for the most important responsibility of all, taking care of your mother. What would she do if you came to the mine with me?”

“Don’t try to trick me.” Denis turned surly. “If I’m becoming a man, I shouldn’t have to go to the river after school. None of my friends are there, only women and children. And why go to school? You didn’t—I want to be like you.”

“You will NOT be like me.” Jerome’s throat closed as he struggled to keep his voice down, and he was overcome by hacking. “My life’s not my own. The mine controls me. The men who came from outside and set up shops in town to buy cobalt from us—they control me. The men who own warehouses in the city, the men who own corporations in another country—they control me without even knowing I exist. Denis, cobalt is power. Control it and the world is yours. Be controlled by it and you will spend your life in the mine.”

Denis was trembling. Jerome realized he was squeezing his son's shoulders too hard and relaxed his grip.

"Now, I need your help with something important that only you can do." Jerome pulled a few coins from his pocket and handed them to Denis. "I want to surprise your mother. After school stop by the market and get a bag of flour. Don't tell her! Tonight, we'll make a cake." Denis's eyes widened: flour! His parents rarely indulged in such a luxury.

Therese came up behind Denis and tousled his hair. Jerome winked at him, and he snuck the coins into his pocket. Therese finished buttoning her husband's shirt, then bent down to button her son's.

"My two men, always scheming. What trouble are you getting into now? Enough—Denis, get to school. I'll see you at the river this afternoon."

The kobold stood as Therese and Jerome hefted blue polypropylene bags onto their shoulders and shifted the rocks inside poking their backs. Jerome helped Therese with the first bags every morning—the rest she carried herself. The kobold started down the path to the river with them, careful that their bare feet didn't step on her as they slipped in the mud.

"As soon as Denis graduates, I'm buying a pair of shoes," Therese complained.

The kobold smiled; Therese said this every morning. When they approached the river, the kobold heard the familiar thud of wood pounding on stone. Their neighbor Marie was standing ankle deep in an upper stretch of the river where the flat stones provided a place to do laundry.

As she beat mine dirt from the clothes it flowed off the stones into the water, fanning out in teal-brown streaks.

Marie's youngest played on the stones, slapping them with a stick in imitation of her mother. Soon she would be old enough to help in earnest. Therese rarely saw Marie's older son anymore. He was the same age as Denis, and the two boys were friends. But their neighbor's mine was yielding less and less ore, and they could no longer afford his tuition. Now he worked with his father for days at a time and they sometimes even slept in the mine.

"Mama, monster!" Marie's daughter exclaimed. The kobold hid behind a rock—the little girl was still at an age where she could sometimes perceive things the adults couldn't.

"Don't speak to your elders like that!" Marie scolded her, thinking she was pointing at Jerome.

"Your daughter's growing so fast!" Therese greeted Marie as she set the bag down.

"My, so much ore—Jerome, you must be doing well." Marie replied.

"It's always a struggle. Your husband's such a help to me." Jerome replied.

Therese pretended she didn't notice the threadbare clothes spread across the stones. "Marie, tonight we want to make a special meal for Denis, but Jerome's off to the mine and I have to clean these rocks. Are you going fishing this afternoon? Would you please catch three fish for us?" She looked at Jerome and he took a coin from his pocket.

"What're you doing? Of course, I'll bring you fish—the best of the catch." Marie pushed the coin away.

“You must join us! I’m going to make a cake!” Jerome said enthusiastically. “Come here little one.” Jerome waved over Marie’s daughter and pressed the coin into her hand. “You keep this safe for your mother.”

As they approached the river, they heard crying children. The kobold hung back to avoid being seen by them, staying at the junction with the path to the mines while Therese and Jerome turned down to the water. A shallow part of the river was divided into pools by sandbags to make cleaning mine rocks easier. The trees that lined the banks when Therese and Jerome were children had been cut down by the lumber mill years ago—sunlight glared on the river stones and the beads of sweat dripping off the working women.

Sleeping infants were tied to their mothers with faded red, yellow, and orange sashes, wrapped around their heads to shield them from the sun. Therese was grateful Denis was grown. The first year had nearly broken her, bending over the river all day with his weight on her back. Toddlers played on the bank, chasing each other in and out of the water. Older daughters helped scrub and sort the rocks. A few lucky families were doing well enough to send their sons to school; the rest were with their fathers in the mines.

“Until tonight, my love.” Jerome dropped his burden on a sandbag and kissed Therese goodbye, heading back up the path toward the mine where the kobold waited.

Therese pulled out a wire brush and scrubbed the rocks one by one. Orphans rooted through the castoffs on the bank in case she and the other women overlooked any with ore. Occasionally one would rush off with a find, and Therese usually ignored them. Sometimes one of the women would give them a beating, but then the others would take advantage of the ruckus to swarm over the sandbags grabbing whatever they could.

Therese paused to consider the rock in her hand, her eyes tracing the dark chocolate-brown veins that indicated cobalt. Such a strange thing. In this rock there was enough cobalt to power ten cell phones. And yet a cell phone was something she would never own, something only the foreign brokers in town could afford. In her bags there was enough cobalt to power an electric car; the village had one diesel truck the families all shared. Jerome once told her a broker said people in foreign countries spent billions of dollars on devices powered with cobalt. Therese was sure this must be nonsense—in a good week she and Jerome might make twenty dollars.

She set the rock aside and started in on another one. When these bags were finished, there were more waiting at home. The men took a break from the mines every week and went into town to sell the yields, but for the women there was no rest. She would haul rocks back and forth until the sun was low on the horizon, until her legs groaned and her back wailed.

The kobold squatted at the opening to the mine, a simple hole in the ground surrounded by cyan wildflowers, while Jerome fixed a plastic light to his head and slung his tools—a mallet and a broken-handled shovel—across his chest. She scurried below him as he made his way down the near-vertical entrance. It had rained the last few nights, and the walls were slick. She checked behind her to be sure Jerome's bare soles found each foothold.

Once the tunnel leveled, he was able to move on his hands and knees through the inch-deep water pooled in the depressions on the floor. The kobold crawled along the ceiling to stay dry, but Jerome's pants and shirt-cuffs were soon soaked. Drips of sweat added to the pools.

Jerome's diaphragm convulsed—the air was heavy and damp from the overnight stillness. He turned on fans as he moved down the tunnel.

Jerome descended into the deepest part of the mine, reached the end of the shaft, and crouched in the foot-deep pool gathered there from tiny rivulets running down the floor of the tunnel. He placed the shovel blade at a spot in the wall and struck the broken handle with his mallet, clearing away the dirt to expose ore-rich rocks. He was sweating from his labor, but his skin felt clammy.

As the kobold scanned the darkness, a foreboding spark suddenly surged through her nerves. She felt along the ceiling with her fingertips. The rainwater had seeped into the ground and softened it—the kobold found tiny cracks above Jerome. She closed her eyes and focused on the intuition that came from the ore in her cells, probing with her mind into the soil above the ceiling. There, a few feet away, she sensed a massive boulder bigger than Jerome, moving imperceptibly as the water gathered around it. Soon one drop of water, one particle of dirt would shift, and the precise balance holding it in place would fail.

The kobold dropped to the floor and screamed at Jerome, but she knew he couldn't hear her. She rushed into the pool until she was up to her neck in muddy water and tugged furiously at his feet, but she knew he couldn't feel her. Jerome's hammering reverberated through her bones, and her heart drummed in rhythm with it, louder and louder until she felt dizzy. With every thump dirt leapt from the ceiling and danced off the floor. The beat raced. The tunnel whirled. Glinting flecks of silica cavorted in the air. The elemental chorus reached a crescendo in a single, unified note as Jerome's mallet struck the shovel one final time. A shudder went through the wall and up the ceiling, where the dirt broke loose and fell.

Jerome hesitated for less than a moment, then he ran. It was too late. The boulder crashed down on his ankles, mangling them. The kobold ran back and forth, pushing the boulder, pulling on his wrists with all her strength, but to no avail. Then she froze. Jerome's eyes were wide, and he was staring directly at her. Somehow as the veil of this world lifted to reveal the next, he was able to see her. She inched toward his face. He tried to speak, but his mouth was full of dirt and his lungs were wheezing. She placed her hands on his cheeks and sang softly to him as his headlamp flickered and failed. In the darkness she curled up beside his chest, listening to his heart as it slowed and then stopped. Her mind filled with darkness—here she would lay with him until his bones turned to dust. Until the goblin metal consumed her every molecule and there was nothing left but a fossil of her former self.

Denis folded his school shirt and placed it next to the bag of flour inside his pack so it wouldn't get dirty at the river. The village's main street consisted of a few one-story concrete buildings along a dirt road, and there was little shade. He sweat through his undershirt as he ran down the path to the river, excited at the prospect of keeping a secret from his mother right before her eyes. When he reached the bank, he stopped to survey the scene. Women and children. But he understood his father's point—someday Denis would be a boss, own a shop in town and buy cobalt from the men instead of digging it himself. They would look at his polished boots and gold watch with envy while he haggled with them. Maybe he would own more than one shop, maybe even a warehouse in the city. Next to it he would build a mansion for his parents.

A boy sprinted past him into the river straight toward Denis's mother, shouting wildly. Therese calmed the boy until she could understand him, and then a strange look crossed her face,

black like an approaching thunderstorm on the horizon. She hastened toward Denis but kept moving past him.

“Denis, come—the mine!” she shouted at him.

Denis’s pack slid off his shoulder, his shirt and the flour spilling onto the ground. The flour burst, covering his shins in puffs as though he was a giant rising above the clouds. But the clouds caked onto his muddy legs, and he was just a boy. He hesitated, staring at his shirt leeching water out of the dirt, turning from white to brown. Then he ran after his mother.

A tremor disturbed the kobold from her sleep. She grumbled and settled deeper into the lingering warmth of Jerome’s skin. Another tremor, closer. She did not want to be woken. Scrapes of metal against dirt. She did not want to be freed again. Shouting. She wanted to lie here with Jerome’s body until she was no more. A beam of light, and a second and a third. Her eyes snapped open, and her heart quickened. She hastened away from Jerome’s body as the men approached and watched while they tried to revive him. She followed them as they carried him out of the tunnel, trudging through the pooled water. The air grew fresher until she felt a slight breeze. Then the sun set her retinas on fire, and her mind filled with blinding light.

When her eyes adjusted, she saw Jerome’s body on the ground, surrounded by men and boys standing with their shoulders slumped, their arms hanging limp at their sides, defeated looks on their faces. They were too familiar with this kind of loss. Therese shoved through them and fell to her knees. She took Jerome’s face in her hands and pleaded with him; then she slapped him; then she pummeled him with her fists. More women arrived from the river and pulled her away.

The crowd opened and the kobold saw Denis standing motionless. The pall of one touched by death for the first time settled upon him and his gaze fixed on the kobold. There was no accusation in his stare, no wrath. Only wonder, followed by recognition. Followed by a flicker of grief that grew hotter as it spread through his body until his blood burned blue. Then he turned to his mother and buried his face in her waist.

The kobold sat in the mud long after the men carried Jerome's body away. When darkness seeped across the sky, she moved along the familiar path from the mine back into the village. She waited outside the door until Therese and Denis came home and followed them inside. Without speaking they collapsed on the mattress. Therese faced the cinderblock wall and Denis lay beside her, his hand touching her shoulder. They both sobbed quietly until, exhausted, they fell asleep.

The kobold crouched in the far corner, her arms around her knees, her eyes on the floor. Deep into the night she stayed there. Her lips twitched as though she was muttering to herself, but there was no sound. Then she realized Denis had turned around and was staring at her, his eyes now hard with determination. He motioned toward her. She crawled onto the mattress and lay beside his face, murmuring her secrets into his ear. Tomorrow, he would follow the cyan wildflowers and dig his broken-handled shovel into the ground.