

CHAPTER NINE

Ear Eaters

James woke with a splitting headache and a trail of dried blood on his face. He groaned and tried to reach up to touch his wound, but found his hands and feet bound with tight ropes. A third rope was fastened around his waist, securing him to a wooden stake at his back, and a small gag was tied across his mouth, preventing him from speaking.

What's going on? James wondered, his thoughts sluggish.

At first, he could only make out a few dark shapes ahead, moving around a flickering light. As things came into focus, he realized he sat on the outskirts of a small gathering, with about a dozen hunched figures surrounding a small fire. In the dim light of the flames, James could just make out his captors' features. His heart sank when he realized what they were.

Goblins!

They were the ugliest things he'd ever seen. The goblins had moist, sagging skin, ranging from sickly green to gray; their eyes were beady black slits; their ears were pointed; and their hair, if they had any, was greasy and matted. Each goblin wore armor, from rusty chain mail to faded leather, and most carried sharp cleavers at their sides, like large butchers' knives. But the worst thing about them was their stench. They smelled like swamp water at the end of a long, scorching summer day.

James was in trouble. Not the 'you're being called to the principal's office' kind, but real trouble. His only consolations were that he didn't see Edwin tied up anywhere and that he could feel traces of the fire's warmth, which gave energy to his cold, aching body.

The goblins still hadn't noticed he'd woken. They were busy passing something around the fire, arguing over it. The object passed into the hands of the goblin nearest James, and he

recognized the Polaroid picture that had been in his pocket. He struggled against his bonds and tried to yell, ‘Put that down!’ But the cloth in his mouth distorted the words, so they sounded more like, “Poo ahht dooon!”

All the goblins turned to look at him.

Uh-oh, James thought.

“Finally,” the goblin holding the picture said. He had a gruff voice, and James wondered if he was the leader because all the other goblins looked at him when he spoke. Instead of a cleaver, his weapon was a large, double-sided battleaxe. “I told you not to hit him so hard, Longknife,” he growled.

“It’s not my fault, Axe,” Longknife protested. “He was weaker than I expected.”

Axe grumbled. He stood, then turned to face his prisoner.

James didn’t know if goblins played sports, but if they did, Axe would be a linebacker in goblin football. He was enormous. Unlike the others, his skin didn’t sag but stretched taut over bulging muscles. His hands were as big as frying pans, and he’d sharpened his nails to points. James also guessed that his name wasn’t a coincidence, since his mother obviously hadn’t named him ‘Axe’ after the popular cologne. He knew how to use the weapon at his side. He’d certainly killed countless people with it, and James might be next.

Axe stepped away from the goblin circle, moving close to James and crouching so his wretched face was just inches from James’s. He smiled, revealing rows of shark-like teeth. “Don’t worry,” Axe said, his breath reeking of rotten meat. “This will all be over soon.” He snapped his teeth.

The other goblins gathered around the fire cackled, and one shouted, “I call dibs on his heart.”

“No!” Axe bellowed, turning back to face the others. “His heart will be mine.”

“Fine,” the other goblin said. “His fingers, then.”

Axe sighed. “Yes, you may have one of his fingers, Croakthroat.” He sounded annoyed. He turned back to James and removed the gag with his slimy fingers.

James thought of several things to say, many of which were clever and brave, but he settled on “Let me go,” the lamest choice.

“I have no such plans, human. On the contrary, I have a few questions for you. Answer them, and that will be the end of it.”

“Can we hurry?” Longknife shouted. “I’m hungry.”

Axe rolled his eyes. “Breathe another word, Longknife, and you’ll be the side dish to this morsel.” Axe turned back to James. “Who are you? I’ve killed those from every city in Theridal, and you don’t smell like any human I’ve ever met.”

James strained against his bonds. “Why would I tell you if you’re just going to kill me anyway?”

To James’s dismay, Axe’s smile widened. “I’ve heard that question many times, human. Many men, stronger and braver than you, have refused to answer, but they all talked in the end. Didn’t they, boys?”

A chorus of agreement rose from the circle of goblins.

“If you want to be stubborn, we will play a little game,” Axe continued. “In this game, I will ask a question, and you will answer. If you refuse, I will let a goblin eat one of your fingers...while it is still attached. Now, doesn’t that sound like fun?”

The goblins cheered.

“And...” James stammered. “What happens if I answer your questions?”

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“If you answer all my questions, you win the game, human!”

“Then you’ll let me go?”

“Of course not,” Axe chuckled. “No. Your reward will be a quick death by my axe. If you win, we won’t eat you until after you’re dead.”

James was too horrified to speak. This couldn’t be happening. He wasn’t meant to die like this—far from home, alone, eaten piece by piece by stinky goblins. Yet here he was. Fear pressed in even more as he realized that even if he managed to free himself from his bonds, he stood no chance against the goblins. There was no way out. The best he could hope for was a quick, painless death.

“Now,” Axe hissed. “Let’s try this again. Who are you?”

James trembled as he spoke. “James,” he whispered.

“What was that? You’ll have to speak up, human.”

“I’m James,” he said, louder this time. “James Storie.”

“James Storie,” Axe mused. “An odd name for an odd human. Where are you from, James Storie?”

James looked at the picture in Axe’s hands. His own face and his mother’s smiled back at him as if nothing were wrong. He wanted to shout at the boy in the photo, telling him to stay home—to not act like such a brat before his mother’s collapse—to enjoy those last moments of happiness.

But then he shifted his focus to his mother’s image. ‘I believe in you,’ the image seemed to say. ‘Don’t give up.’

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A spark of determination ignited within James and spread through his body. He wouldn't give up. He'd find a way out of this, not just because he wanted to, but because he *had* to—for her.

“Ahh,” Axe sighed. “I see you have a fondness for this.” He shook the photograph. “Don't worry, we're getting to that. I want to know where I can find this other juicy morsel. You see, after we're finished eating you, we're going after her next.”

James wanted to retort, to say and do whatever came to mind, but his mother's words about controlling his anger rang in his ears. So he shut his eyes instead and fought those rageful instincts, trying to clear his mind. It worked. His initial anger subsided, leaving only resolve.

“Come on, Axe,” a dumb-sounding goblin complained. “This is taking forever. Stop giving the human so much time to think. I'm hungry, and he smells extra good.”

“Quiet, Munch. You never think beyond your current meal. I'm trying to get us another one for next time.”

“We don't care about our next meal,” Croakthroat whined. “We want this one. Right now.”

“Shut it, all of you!” Axe drew his battleaxe from his back and swung it in a wide arc. James flinched, then realized it wasn't meant for him. It was a warning to the others. That gave him an idea—one so terrible that it might work.

Axe turned back around. “Answer my questions, human. No more delays. Where are you from?”

“Springbrook,” James said. “I'm from Springbrook.”

“Springbrook?” Axe scratched his head. “I've never heard of it.”

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“I’d be surprised if you had. It’s...not around here. I’m an Outlander. That’s why I smell different from the others. Because...back in my world, we’re known for how tasty we are.”

Every goblin in the cave perked up their ears. James had their attention.

“You’re an Outlander?” Axe asked.

James nodded.

“Hear that, boys?” Axe roared. “We’ve got an Outlander on our hands! Tonight, we’ll be the first to taste one of them!”

The goblins cackled and licked their lips.

“You know, a very dangerous man wants you dead,” Axe said, lowering his voice.

“Imagine how Nilas will reward me when he learns I’ve dealt with you.”

“Nilas?” James asked. He’d heard that name before, but...wanting James dead? That was new.

“Yes,” Axe hissed.

“Who is he?”

“You do not ask the questions, Outlander. I ask the questions. Why did you come here? Is this woman an Outlander, too?” Axe held up the Polaroid.

James wanted to know more about Nilas, but he pushed those thoughts aside. That didn’t matter now. He needed to escape the goblins first. They looked even more ravenous—if that were possible—after learning he was an Outlander. That made his plan both more dangerous and more likely to succeed.

“I ran away because...well, I didn’t want to be eaten. I only came here a few days ago.”

James wondered whether Axe would suspect the lie, but he appeared more desperate than before, and he, too, had a hungry look in his eyes.

“Well, that didn’t work for you, did it?” Axe laughed. “Tell me, what makes you Outlanders so tasty?”

“Oh, well, we...”

“What’s the best part?” Longknife interrupted. “Your fingers? Your toes? I always love the wiggles.”

“I told you he smelled extra good,” Munch declared, drool dripping from his mouth. “I’ve got a nose for this kind of thing.”

“No!” James shouted.

“Well,” Axe prompted. “What’s the best part? Answer Longknife’s question.”

“Um...” James looked around at the goblins closing in like a pack of hungry wolves. One of them twitched an ear, and James instinctively said, “Our ears!”

“Your ears?” Axe asked in disbelief.

“Yes,” James confirmed. “Our ears are the best part.”

“But...there’s no meat in those,” Longknife said, sounding rather put out.

James’s stomach fluttered with panic. He needed to sell this—to go all-in if he wanted his plan to succeed. If he didn’t, he’d only make things worse for himself. Fortunately, the goblins didn’t seem too bright.

“True,” he said, “but our ears are made of something different than meat. It’s called cartilage, and it’s much tastier than meat and bones.”

“Tastier than meat and bones?” Munch asked, as if such a thing didn’t exist.

“Oh, definitely,” James said. “It’s a...chewy substance that gives our delicious ears such long-lasting flavor—gets stuck in your teeth for weeks—or so I’ve been told. I’ve never been lucky enough to try them myself.”

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Axe lowered his nose to James's ear and took a long, deep breath. It was, without a doubt, the most uncomfortable experience James had ever had.

"They do smell exquisite," Axe agreed.

"I call dibs!" Munch exclaimed.

"No, I want the ears," Longknife barked.

Suddenly, the whole gang of goblins was arguing over who would get to eat James's ears. Under different circumstances, he might've appreciated that others considered his ears a delicacy. But for now, he'd settle for escaping with them still attached.

"Silence," Axe bellowed. The ruckus died down. "We cannot all eat your ears, Outlander. They're tiny, and there are only two of them."

"Of course not. That's part of what makes them such a rarity," James said, as if it were common sense.

The goblins mumbled in agreement.

"But," Axe began, "there are several of us and only two ears. How do people in your land decide who gets to eat them?"

"Well," James paused, trying to sound uncertain, "I don't want to cause any trouble, but people don't usually share ears."

"So, one person will eat both?" Axe asked.

James nodded. "Typically, the ears go to whoever's in charge."

"What? That can't be right!" Longknife shouted, prompting complaints from the other goblins.

Axe smiled and licked his lips. "Yes, that's how it should be. I will eat his ears. The rest of you may share the rest of his body."

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Axe pulled a knife from his belt.

Alarm shot through James like lightning. “Wait!” he yelled. “You don’t know *anything* about eating humans, do you?”

Axe paused. “What do you mean?”

“I *mean*,” James said, “I’ve been sitting here, tied up, for hours. I don’t have any blood flow in my hands, let alone my ears. That’s half the flavor! I’m sure Munch knows what I’m talking about.” James couldn’t believe the words coming out of his mouth, but they seemed to have the effect he was looking for.

“That’s right,” Munch confirmed. “We need to untie him so that his blood will flow to his ears and fingers and toesies.”

Axe snorted. “Untie a prisoner? Sounds like trickery to me.”

It took all of James’s self-control not to react. He didn’t think Axe had discovered his plan. He needed to stay calm. He shrugged. “I didn’t say anything about untying me. But Munch is right. If there’s another way to restore my blood flow, other than untying me, then go for it.” He did his best to sound casual, but deep down, he hoped the goblins didn’t have a magical way to restore blood flow.

Axe sighed in frustration. “If we untie you and restore your blood flow, then your ears will be good enough to eat?”

“Yes,” James said, nodding. “Only for you, though,” he clarified. “Or whoever is in charge. Remember?”

“I am in charge. I will eat the ears,” Axe declared. “Untie the prisoner!”

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Two goblins slipped out of the circle and disappeared behind James. A knife sliced through the rope tying him to the stake and the one around his hands. Unfortunately, they didn't cut the rope binding his feet together. *I guess even goblins aren't that stupid*, he thought.

A sudden rush of blood returned to James's hands—that part hadn't been a lie. He stood up, taking his time, looking left and right for an escape while pretending to rub his ears. He noticed the goblins had camped near the back of the cave, so he knew which way to run if given the chance. But there was something else near the back wall. A red shadow, huddled on the ground—not a goblin. A pair of hungry yellow eyes watched him, sending a shiver down James's spine.

“Well?” Axed asked. “Are your ears ready for eating?”

James looked away from the yellow eyes and focused on Axe. This was the moment of truth. In a few seconds, he would either be a free man or goblin chow.

“All right,” James said. “Everything seems to be in order. My ears are ready.”

Axe smiled and raised his knife. “You met death well, Outlander. Better than most humans. The sacrifice of your ears will not be forgotten.”

He reached out with the knife, and for a second, James feared his plan had failed. He felt the cold steel edge of the blade touch the top of his ear, and a trickle of blood slid down the side of his face. He was about to make a run for it, or hop for it, as it were, when—

“Agh!”

Axe roared, dropping his knife as Longknife leaped on him from behind and bit into his neck. The knife clattered to the ground, and Axe struggled to pry Longknife off. But the smaller goblin held on tight, dodging Axe's giant hands. Thick blood spurted from Axe's wound, and before long, he sank to his knees, then fell facedown and lay motionless.

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James couldn't believe what he'd just seen. Neither, apparently, could the other goblins. They stood frozen, watching the scene unfold.

"I will have your ears," Longknife panted. He lunged at James but stopped short when a boulder blasted him from behind, slamming him into the far wall of the cave.

"Not if I get them first!" Munch declared.

The entire campsite erupted into chaos as the goblins began fighting each other. It was a brutal scene, made even worse when James remembered that the whole thing was about seeing who would eat his ears. But amid the chaos, the goblins forgot about James. He bent down and scooped up the Polaroid photo, slipped it back into his pocket, and grabbed Axe's abandoned knife, which he used to saw through the restraints around his ankles.

He stood and took one last look at the camp. The goblins still fought each other, and the shadowy creature with yellow eyes still lingered in the corner, just out of view. James didn't want to wait around to find out what it was. Not wanting to waste another second, he turned and sprinted away.

James wished Coach Lightfoot could've seen him now. As it turned out, a pack of hungry goblins trying to eat his ears was the perfect motivation for a fast run. Soon, much to his relief, he saw the mouth of the tunnel ahead. And silhouetted against it were two small humans and three horses.

James could have cried in relief. Not only had he escaped the goblins, but the others were all right, too.

"Guys!" he called.

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Cassandra and Oliver sprang into action, turning to face him and summoning their soulblades. James hadn't seen Cassandra's soulblade yet—the one he knew had belonged to her mother—but its blade gleamed with a green sheen, matching her eyes.

"It's me," James said, slowing as he drew near.

"James?" Cassandra asked. "We thought...it's been hours. What happened to you?"

"Long story," James panted. "But never mind that. We need to go. Now."

"What's the matter?" Oliver asked.

"Goblins."

Oliver tensed and looked down into the cave's depths with renewed interest. "How many?"

"About a dozen, maybe fewer now. They're fighting each other."

"Fighting each other?" Cassandra asked, looking confused.

"I'll explain later," James said. "Let's get out of..."

A blood-chilling howl echoed from the depths of the cave, making all three of them turn toward it.

"James," Oliver said in a low voice. "I thought you said it was just goblins."

"I did. It was," James said. "I mean, there was something else, but I didn't get a good look at it."

"We need to go!" Cassandra demanded.

The others ran to their horses, and James followed suit. Within seconds, they were out of the cave and racing up the mountain road.

"What is it?" James asked.

"A skol," Oliver growled.

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“Of course,” James said. “And what exactly *is* a skol?”

“Do you remember when I told you about the twisted creatures that live down in the Ruined Lands?” Cassandra asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well, skol are one of those creatures.”

“They’re hunters,” Oliver explained. “Good ones. Once they pick up a scent, they never lose it. They’ll kill you or die trying. I’ve never heard of one being this far north.”

The road leveled out and widened as they approached the mountain pass, and they quickened their pace.

“What do they look like?” James asked over the rush of the wind.

“To you, something like a mix between a big dog and a wolf, except that it has red fur and fangs,” Cassandra said.

“Perfect,” James said. “Just what I needed right after almost being eaten by goblins.”

“We need to reach Mount Amon,” Cassandra said. “We’ll be safe there. It’s not much farther.”

They crested a hill, and giant gates appeared ahead, standing in a massive gap between twin mountain peaks. Torchlight illuminated the gates, beating back the night’s darkness. Beyond them, James could see the glow of a city. *We’re going to make it*, he thought.

A menacing snarl came from the side of the road—the sound of a rabid animal closing in for the kill. James glanced at the trees and caught a glimpse of a shadow moving through them. He opened his mouth to warn the others.

He wasn’t quick enough.

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The skol leaped out of the woods and collided with James, knocking him off Edwin's back. The world spun, and James hit the ground, losing his breath. He lifted his head.

The skol stood a few yards away. It was terrifying—like a giant wolf and a saber-toothed tiger had a baby. Covered in patchy, blood-red fur, the skol looked sickly and unnatural. Yet it was lean and powerful. Its feral yellow eyes fixed on James, and it snapped its powerful jaws, spraying spittle across the road.

James didn't speak skol, but he figured it meant something like 'I could snap your neck like a toothpick.' He wondered what its teeth would feel like around his throat. Would he suffer, or would it be over before he felt anything at all? He'd find out soon enough.

The skol lunged at James.

Edwin darted between James and the attacking skol, rearing up and flailing his hooves to fend off the monster. James heard a loud thud, then a painful yelp, as the skol retreated, growling at Edwin. Then Oliver rode by and took a swipe at the skol, but the creature dodged and snapped back at Oliver's legs. His black battle horse, Ryder, danced out of the way just in time.

"James! Think fast!" Oliver yelled. He threw something, and James recognized Oliver's silver soulblade as it clattered across the road, sliding to a stop by James's side. James grabbed the weapon and jumped to his feet. He stepped between Edwin and the skol, leveling the blade at the creature.

What happened next, James would never fully remember. He stopped thinking and let his body move on its own, giving in to a sort of 'combat sense' as instincts he didn't realize he had took over.

The skol circled James and Edwin, searching for an opening. The next time it attacked, James was ready. He swung Oliver's soulblade through the air, sickened and satisfied as the steel

sliced through flesh. The skol snarled in pain. Backing away, it began circling in the opposite direction. The next time it attacked, James anticipated it again. Now he could *sense* the skol's frustration. He knew it was about to make a final, desperate attack.

The skol pounced with blinding speed. James raised Oliver's sword at the last possible second, and the creature smashed into him, hurling him to the ground.

The next thing James knew, he was lying flat on his back, pinned to the ground beneath the skol's body. Warm blood trickled down James's hand, though whether it was his or the skol's, he wasn't sure. His hand was inside the skol's slack-jawed mouth, still clenching the soulblade's hilt. When he looked up, he saw the blade's silver tip protruding from the back of the skol's neck.

He had killed it.

James let go of the sword and tried to wriggle free from the carcass, but it was too heavy. It wasn't until Oliver and Cassandra appeared overhead that, together, they managed to push the dead creature off him. Then, they pulled James to his feet.

The others were staring at him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"You...how did you do that?" Oliver asked.

"Do what?"

"Fight," Oliver said. "The way you moved. You should have seen yourself. Not many people can fight like that."

"I don't know," James admitted. "It was more luck than anything else. I just kind of...raised the sword at the right time."

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Oliver shook his head. “No. It wasn’t like that. I saw it. I’ve never heard of anyone killing a skol that way.”

James didn’t like the way they were staring at him. He turned away, knelt beside the skol, and pulled Oliver’s sword from its mouth. Dark blood covered the blade. He wiped it against the creature’s fur until he was satisfied that it was clean. Then he handed it back to Oliver.

“Thanks,” he said. “I would’ve been dead without it.”

“No problem,” Oliver said. “But I think it’s about time we got you a sword of your own. First goblins, and now skol? You need to be able to defend yourself. What do you think, Cassandra?”

Cassandra eyed James curiously, then shifted her gaze to their surroundings. “Let’s keep moving,” she said. “We don’t know what else might be out there. The sooner we get behind Mount Amon’s walls, the better. We can find James a suitable sword tomorrow.” With that, she headed back toward Archer.

When James approached Edwin, he could tell something had changed between them. Against the skol, they’d both protected each other. James bowed to Edwin in respect, then stepped closer and rubbed the horse’s muzzle. “Thank you, Edwin,” he whispered. “You were amazing. You saved my life twice today.”

Edwin nickered with approval.

James swung into Edwin’s saddle. He sat up, checked to make sure the others were ready, and led the way toward the gates of Mount Amon.