

Timp and the Blueberry Vikings

Book 2

When Worlds Collide

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For the McClures
And Mom

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

WARNING! This book contains magic, mischief, wicked-horrible villains, and bees. While all of these things can be dangerous, one should be respected above the others: Bees.

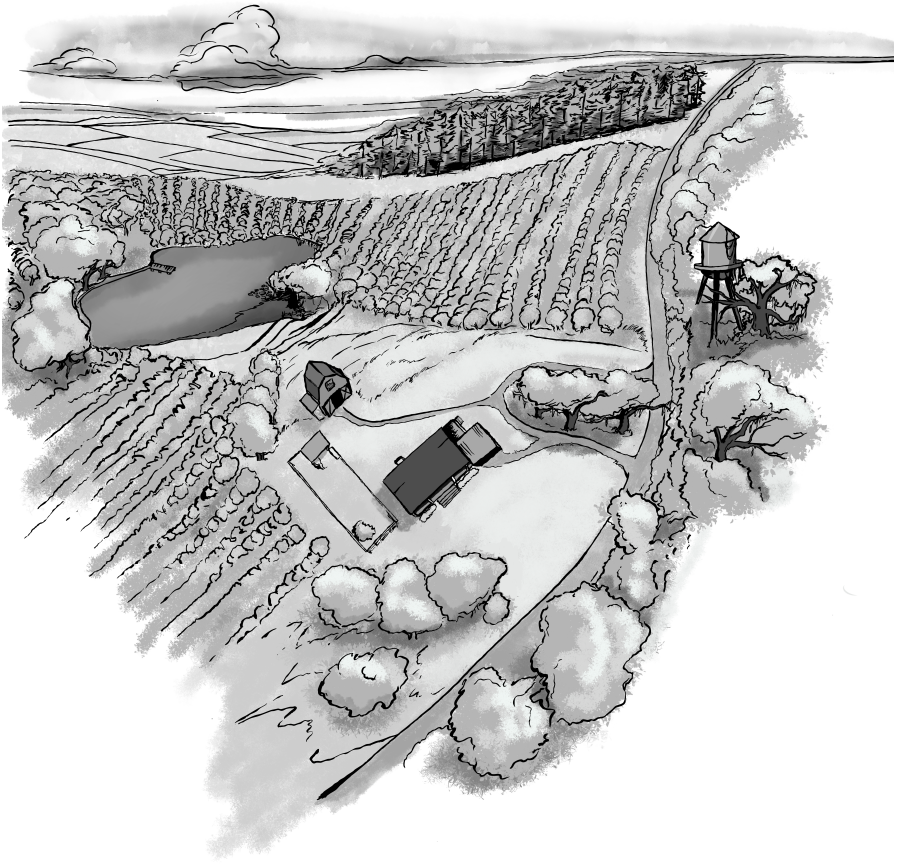
Bees are fascinating insects that are vital to our eco-system, but they can also be deadly. After reading this book, you might decide to find yourself a bee. Don't do it. Bees are not pets. Bees can be territorial. If a bee feels threatened, it will sting you. If you happen to be allergic, you could die. You don't want that. So, DON'T MESS WITH BEES!

If you're interested in bees, first have yourself tested for allergies. If you're not allergic, contact your local apiarist. Apiarists raise bees and harvest honey. They're generally quirky, awesome, and friendly people who love to talk about bees (especially if you buy some of their honey—Mmm honey).

Some apiarists offer classes about beekeeping. It's a safe, interesting way to learn, and the best part is you won't die . . . most likely. That's good, right? Right. So, show bees some respect, and leave them bee. (Get it: "bee"/ "be"?) That's a very witty pun that I came up with—You're so lucky you're reading this book.

Also, avoid wicked-horrible villains. They're both wicked and horrible. You know what, just don't do anything in this book. It's all dangerous . . . but I do hope you enjoy reading about it, though.

– Blueberry Springs Farm –



"The hands can't hit what the eyes can't see.

Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.

Rumble, young man. Rumble!"

Drew Bundini Brown

PART III

When Worlds Collide

PICTURE

PICTURE

CHAPTER 1

HANG'N WITH MOLLY

"Stupid . . . Lousy . . . Fraggin . . . Little . . . Blue . . . Grumpies," Mrs. Molly Net Captive cursed as she sawed through the net with her last sharp claw. The rope was frayed from the previous night's work. She was almost through. *"Just . . . one . . . more . . . stupid . . . lousy. Yes!"*

The grumpies had captured Molly the previous morning. Before that, they'd invaded her lands, threw her into the pond—twice—and attacked her with a swarm of bees. *"The jerks."* Molly would simply have to kill them all.

The net split and Molly felt the sweet rush of freedom, followed by the not-so-sweet rush of the ground smacking her face. Cats don't *always* land on their feet. Sometimes, they land on their faces.

Molly shook her head, stood up, and stretched her stiff muscles. Several feet away, an army of tiny blue grumps worked to rebuild their village. Every grump had a task. Some carried lumber; some hammered; some sawed. All focused their attention wholly on their diligent work, which meant no one was watching Molly. *Now I'll get those devils. Now I'll have my revenge.*

Molly lowered her chin and stuck her bottom into the air. Her kitty-cat ninja pose was locked and loaded. She crept forward. *I'll show them. I'll show them all. I'll bat 'em around like little fuzz balls and then eat them one by one.* Molly licked her chops.

No one noticed the giant beast stalking them.

"*Oh, sweet sweet vengeance,*" Molly purred with each tiny step.

Then she heard that dreadful familiar click. "Cat-apult!"

Molly clawed to escape, but the catapult launched her straight through a gaping hole in the canopy above, and sent her flailing toward the center of the pond.

"*Typical. Just typical.*"

Mrs. Molly Mud Skipper went *Kurplunk!*

CHAPTER 2

TIMP TO CELEBRATE

Timp worked the table at the farmers' market while his mother ran orders throughout the complex, and his father delivered berries around town with Trevor. (OK, Trevor probably sat in the truck playing on his phone). Timp could hardly remember a busier morning. The blueberry pies sold out by nine, the wine by ten, and the preserves by eleven. They even sold out of his father's experimental jalapeno-blueberry jam, which Mr. Littleton had named Blue Lightning and tasted good to him and him alone, but most of their business came from the raw berries the Vikings had picked. They'd done in a few hours what his family couldn't do in a month, cementing their friendship in the process. Timp poured himself into this work with a new vigor, but an ominous cloud loomed near.

"Well, if it ain't my old buddy, Tim." The oilman who had once used Timp as a footrest stood across the table with a meat-and-potato grin.

Timp suspected Mr. Bronson remembered his name—the oilman liked to play dumb—but decided to correct him just anyway. "It's Timp."

"Timp? Are you sure? What kinda name is Timp?"

Timp was used to this question and went into autopilot: "Interesting that you ask. According to my father, I was named after Mount Timpanogos, which is in Utah. My father went there on a spiritual journey to prepare his mind, body, and soul for fatherhood. But my grandmother says that's a bunch of hogwash. She claims that "Timp" is short for "Timpleton." Timpleton Littleton. Can you believe that? Hopefully, her story is the hogwash. I mean what kind of—"

"Woah, mule! Simmer down there, fella. Your mouth is running faster than a freight train running ice cream through the desert." Bronson leaned in and whispered, his southern drawl instantly dropping away. "I just came over to warn you about DeLaney. You embarrassed him mighty good at that board meeting, but showing up here with a full haul of berries like this, he's going be out for blood. You're doing great. Keep your eyes open. He's always watching."

The oilman flicked his head over his left shoulder toward the bridge, and then stood up straight and resumed his normal boisterous volume. "Well, I done told ya, if you got anything worth buying, I'm gonna take ya up on it. So, I reckon I'll take a quart of them berries, there."

Bronson dropped a twenty on the table, and Timp opened the change box. A train whistled, and the coins began to rattle in their cubbies.

The farmers' market was in Shreveport's Festival Plaza, the same grounds that held the Red River Reveille, Art Break, and Mudbug Madness. It was a concrete slab that spanned two city blocks, bordered by a railroad track to the South, and an overpass to Market Street to the West. When a train rolled through, no-one could hear the person standing next to them, so everyone stopped what they were doing and watched the steel carts clank by.

Timp dropped a quarter, and as he bent down to pick it up, he noticed a stretch limousine idling on the overpass. *DeLaney*. That's what Bronson had meant. Timp could feel DeLaney's eyes bearing down. He imagined DeLaney's anger, frustration, and humiliation mounting.

DeLaney's plan had failed. He'd hired away the Littletons' workers during the busiest time of the year—a simple plan, but effective. The Littletons had scrambled to pick enough blueberries for Summer Fun Fest. It was the biggest farmers' market of the year and the Littleton's main money maker. Without help, they were the butt end of an Aggie joke, starving to death inside a grocery store. Berries surrounded them, but they couldn't pick enough to make a dent. No berries meant no money. No money meant no farm, which was exactly what DeLaney wanted, the farm. He wanted to turn it into a shopping center. Timp would have been glad to let him have it too. That is, before he met the Vikings. They'd changed everything. They put

him through Hell (or as they'd say "Hel" with one "L"). But in the end, they all became friends, and the Vikings saved the day. Timp didn't know how they did it, but they had. Timp smiled. He thought about flaunting a boastful wave at the limo but decided it was best not to jab at the devil with a hot poker when he's already spitting coals. Timp, Bonnie, and the Vikings had won the battle, but the war had just begun.

"Whatcha staring at, hun?" Timp's mother asked after the train passed.

She'd returned from her visits and deliveries and now worked next to Timp, selling berries.

"Oh, nothing," Timp said, awaking from his thoughts. He turned to give Bronson his change, but the oilman was gone, and so was the limo.

After the last berry sold, Timp and his mother agreed that it was time to celebrate. Mr. Littleton reminded them that they weren't out of trouble, yet. The money they earned that day would help, but they still had another month to go. One more month under the shadow of the Shreveport Bank and Trust and —Timp knew—DeLaney. But a month, well, "That's a whole month away!" They had pockets full of cash—enough to pay their past due balances, this month's note, and a little extra to cover, "Peter, Paul, and Pedro's Pizza Plaza!"

To say that Peter, Paul, and Pedro's Pizza Plaza was heaven on earth would be . . . absolutely correct. It had everything you could possibly want: laser tag, go-karts, miniature golf, batting cages, three arcades, bumper cars, bumper boats, four rock walls, bowling, shuffle board, darts, karaoke, cheap and cheesy nachos (the best kind), pizza, frothy root beer floats, pizza, Dr. Pepper Ices, pizza, pizza, and pizza. It was: Heaven. On. Earth. Even stick-in-the-mud Trevor put his phone in his pocket when they walked through those doors.

It'd been forever since the Littletons donned their Pizza Plaza party hats. When times were good, the Littletons partied at the plaza often, but times had not been good for some time. The drought had delayed the blueberry harvest until late into the summer, and by the time the berries were ripe, DeLaney had hired away every farmhand. But even he hadn't expected the Vikings.

Mr. Littleton pulled Timp to the side and filled his hands with arcade tokens. "You earned it, kiddo. You got us out of a real bind last night. I don't know how you did it, and I don't need to know. I just want you to know that we appreciate it."

Timp focused on the weight of the tokens in his hands. He wasn't used to such heartfelt drivel. He usually did the thanking around the Littleton household (that is, after his mother made him). It felt wrong to take credit for the Vikings' work, but then

again, he'd caught plenty of blame for their mischief. Why not enjoy some of their praise?

"Come on, Timp," Trevor called, shoving a pale, scrawny kid away from the arcade version of Ghost Zombie Apocalypse. Timp did a double-take to make sure Trevor was talking to him. He was. Flashes of their last fight played through Timp's mind. Trevor seemed to have forgotten, but could Timp? The troll had tried to kill Timp's vígbý. That was like trying to kill a piece of his soul—At least, he thought so. Timp still wasn't sure how the whole vígbý, Vaskr-doodle, Gullwingy thing worked. But he knew that Bonnie was his new best bud, and that Trevor had tried to kill her, and not only kill her, but torture her too. Trevor wanted to pull her head off and see how long she lived. Pull off the head of Timp's soul! How do you forgive someone for that? Apparently, by co-op slaying zombies.

The game had two plastic shotguns, one red and one blue, allowing Timp and Trevor to play on the same team. Timp had to adjust to that idea.

"Pump the barrel when you need to reload," Trevor said, clearly as familiar with the arcade version as he was with the console game. "Step on the pedal to duck behind a crate or something. Release it to pop back up. Then you can move forward and shoot. Got it?"

In the glow of Peter, Paul, and Pedro's Pizza Plaza, Timp's hatred for Trevor dissipated. "Got it."

It took Timp a moment to get the mechanics down. Several times, he forgot to reload and ran out of ammo just as a zombie chunked a severed femur at his face. The screen flashed red, and a blood-splattered limb slid down and disappeared, deducting several inches from his health bar. Timp used twice as many tokens as Trevor, but either Trevor didn't notice, or he was gracious enough not to gloat. (Timp figured Trevor didn't notice). Together, they blasted the "U-N" off of the undead, and left them just plain dead.

"OK, when I tell you to duck, duck," Trevor said as they came to a group of super fast zombies, or "ragers," as Trevor called them. The zombie leading the pack leapt toward the screen in a slobbering cannibalistic frenzy. "Duck!" It barely missed Timp, sparing the last blinking tidbit of health that remained. "I hate ragers."

It was a virtual save, not real life, but in a Trevor sort of way, it felt like an apology.

"Thanks," Timp said.

Were Timp and Trevor becoming friends?

Weird.

Timp awoke the next morning hung-over from too much junk food, go-karts, and fun. The previous night was a blur, but Timp pressed his mind to remember. He got tore-up on root beer floats. He remembered that, and . . . yes, now he remembered. (Though, he immediately wished he didn't). He and Trevor had

run around like sugar-crazed zombie ragers. The night ended with Timp standing on a table and singing karaoke to a troupe of Girl Scouts before puking root beer float into their faces and keeling over in a sugar-crash coma. Not his finest moment, Timp admitted. Yep, now that he remembered everything, he began working hard to forget.

"Well, good morning, sunshine," Timp's mother said, as he stumbled into the kitchen. She leaned on the counter, eating breakfast. "That was quite some show last night. You're a real rock star, a regular UpChuck Berry."

His mother beamed with pride.

Timp could tell she'd waited all morning to say that little gem. She probably woke in the middle of the night and wrote it down on a napkin just so she'd remember. Timp expected this kind of tomfoolery from his father, but his mother? He liked her better when she was too stressed about money for wisecracks.

"You know, like Chuck Berry, except UpChuck."

"Oh, I get it," Timp said. "You do know that other people have made music since you and the dinosaurs roamed the earth, right?"

"Oooo, touché. But I'll let that slide. I know you're just upset because your country music career is on decline."

Timp furrowed his brow. He thought that Chuck Berry sang Rock, but he couldn't be sure. Then, he saw the anticipation

in his mother's eyes and realized she was lining up another joke. She burst with the missing punchline: "Barf Brookes. Hahaha!"

This was his life now. Next, she'd say he was Mic Gagger from the Ralphing Stones. He needed to change the subject, fast. There was no telling how long these shenanigans could go on. "Where's Dad?"

"The bank. We actually have something to give them this month thanks to you." She popped the spoon she'd pointed at Timp back into her mouth, humming.

Timp avoided her eyes. Not for the first time, he wished that he could tell his parents about the Vikings.

"Good thing too," she continued. "We have to cover the dry-cleaning bill for an entire Girl Scout troupe. They'll never look at root beer floats the same. That's for sure."

"And Trevor?"

"Still in bed, I imagine. What's wrong? You hoping you two can form a duet?—" Here it comes . . . Wait for it. Wait for it. "Simon and Barffunkle?"

Timp couldn't help but laugh at that one. He had no idea who she was talking about, but "Barffunkle" was just a funny word, maybe the funniest ever. (Next to "squeegee" — "squeegee" is ridiculous!)

"Wow, Lady GagGag. How do you come up with these?" Timp said, trying to cover his mirth.

"Years and years of training, son. Years and years of training."

Years of training . . . training. The word bounced around in Timp's party-addled brain. "Oh, crap! Training!"

"Timp Elvis Pukely, mind your language!"

But the barf king had left the building.

CHAPTER 3

VIKING SUMMER CAMP

You're late," Ailsa called as Timp rounded the bend near the Viking village. Timp stopped and looked around, trying to pinpoint the location of the tiny girl's voice. She waited in silence, but Timp felt her watching him. She probably enjoyed seeing someone so large be so confused. Luckily for Timp, she was also impatient. "I say you are late."

Timp found her, a blue dot on a verdant leaf that hung eye-level over the bend. She stood next to a long horn, which Timp assumed was the Viking equivalent of a megaphone. No wonder he'd been able to hear her while running. Normally, he had to strain his ears to hear them . . . that is, unless they were in his ears. Then, they yelled everything. The blueberry Vikings were aggravating beasts.

"What do *you* want?" he asked, making sure she knew that he hadn't forgotten her betrayal.

The night before last, she'd led him into a trap, where he was stung nearly to death by killer bees. The Viking's pink goo healed the wounds, but Timp would not soon forget the pain.

Wave after wave of armored Vaskrél fell upon him like laps of fire. Had it not been for Bonnie, he'd most certainly have died.

"I wished to meet with thee before ye begin training with Uncle Bjorn."

"Why? So you could lead me into another trap for your psycho father?"

"My father did as he thought best. You must understand, the Jötunn—er—that is giants such as your'n self, art our'n enemy and the enemy of our'n gods. Tis foretold—"

"Look, I don't care what dung-crazed berserker foretold what, when. I'm telling you I'm not your enemy."

"I know that, now." Ailsa studied her feet to avoid Timp's eyes. "I met thee this day to offer my apologies, Giant. I see now that you are Kindred Kind. A giant has never been chosen. We did not know it possible, but The Queen chooses only those of great might and honor. I was wrong to doubt you, and I owe thee a debt."

"Owe me? You didn't help pick all those berries?"

"Nay. Twas not my doing. You have good friends here, Giant. They wished to show their thanks for saving them. We Vikings pay our'n debts. They also believe you are rider to the one true Gullvindr."

"You don't think so?"

"I do not yet know. There've been many Gullvindr and many disappointments. All powerful and forged with purpose, but many failures, many deaths."

"Well, that's reassuring. So, how do you propose to pay off a debt for tricking me, trapping me, and trying to kill me?"

"I have mine ways," Ailsa smiled.

Timp liked her smile. He tried not to like her smile. "And what ways might those be?"

"Tis a surprise. Ye shall see when the time is right."

"What is it?" Timp urged.

"If I told thee, 'twould not be a surprise, Giant."

She had a point there. "Well, I better go meet Bjorn."

Timp turned to sprint away, and Ailsa called after him.

"Aye. You're quite late."

"Quit saying that. I'm not late."

"You're late," Bjorn said.

Bjorn and Bonnie waited on the main bridge leading into the Viking village. It was one of the few bridges still intact. Timp had no trouble reaching the village now that hurricane Bonnie had leveled a path through the thicket. The villagers worked to repair the damage, but no one seemed angry about it, that is—Timp imagined—no one except Hilmir. . . wherever he was.

Bonnie buzzed her wings with anticipation as Timp remained focused on Bjorn.

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" Timp asked. "How can I be late when you never told me what time to be here in the first place?"

Bjorn thought this over for a moment, and then said, "Well, ye run as if ye be late. Ye have guilt upon your'n face as if ye be late. So, ye must be late."

Difficult business, arguing with a Viking.

Bonnie couldn't stand it any longer. She flew to Timp and nuzzled his neck hello.

"Hey, you," Timp said, nuzzling back. He felt her love shoot through him until it almost overwhelmed his senses. He lifted his hand, and Bonnie climbed onto his fingers, allowing him to get a better look at her. "Did you sleep well?"

She had. The Vikings had taken good care of her. Everything was as it should be. He turned his attention to Bjorn and other business. "I heard a rumor that you and the others picked some berries for my family a couple of nights ago."

"It felt a proper payment for risking your'n hide to save our'n. Though, we cannot take full credit, I'll grant thee, the Vaskrél and villagers helped. Fair near all lent their'n hands—save for the hilmir, o' course."

"I can imagine." Timp pictured the hilmir pouting in the corner while villagers and Vaskrél filled bucket after bucket with berries. "Thank you."

"Thank me not. I understand ye are in need of more?"

"Yes. We have another month to go, but still no workers."

"Then, let us strike a bargain. Ye arrive *on time* and work hard at your'n training, and we shall continue to help thee with your'n berries."

"Deal. But if I'm so late, why didn't you ride up and get me?" Timp asked.

"No vígbý." Bjorn spat.

"No vígbý? That's a bee, right? What about Bonnie? She's a bee." Bonnie nuzzled conformation.

Bjorn gasped. "Sit upon another rider's vígbý? Hath thou taken leave of your'n senses, Giant?"

"Why not?"

"'Tisn't done. Ye would not borrow me soul, would thee?"

"I don't know. Would I still get to keep soul? Oh, maybe I could use it to run you around like a puppet or—"

"Enough, Giant. 'Tis not the point. One does not ride upon another's vígbý, ever. Understand?"

"I understand."

"Know thee nothing of becoming a Vaskrél?"

"Um, no," Timp said honestly. "Why would I?"

Bjorn furrowed his brow and stroked his beard. "Aye. 'Tis a fair point. Ye may know less about anything than anyone I've ever known, perhaps even less than O'dul."

Timp followed Bjorn's nod to find O'dul sitting on the bridge and picking his nose.

Timp's expression must have betrayed this thought, because Bjorn amended, "I don't think thee stupid, understand. But you've much to learn—much and more than expected. 'Tis a dangerous time for thee."

"How so?"

"With great power comes great . . ."

"Responsibility?"

"I was to say 'burden,' but aye, responsibility as well."

"That's a Stan Lee quote," Timp said proudly.

"Stanley? Who be Stanley, a god?"

"Not 'Stanley': Stan. Lee. And some might say he was a god. He created Spider-Man."

"He created what?"

"Spider-Man. He's a man who is part spider. He can climb walls and shoot webs and stuff. He uses his power to save people from burning buildings, that sort of thing."

Bjorn marveled at the giant. "'Twould seem I've much and more to learn of *your'n* world as well, Giant."

It occurred to Timp that Bjorn might not realize Spider-Man is fictional, but Bjorn was so enthralled that Timp hated to

let him down. He let it ride. He'd done the same when Ailsa thought that Trevor was literally a troll who had overtaken his room. A little artistic license never hurt anyone. Besides, never let the truth get in the way of a good story. That was a rule he'd heard somewhere. Bjorn probably knew Spider-Man was fake anyway.

"OK, so What's this about burden?"

"Oh," Bjorn continued. "Power be a gift, but 'tis also a burden. Ye must learn to control thine powers so ye can use them for good, much like Stan Lee's man-spider."

"Spider-Man," Timp corrected.

"Aye, and he. The greater the power, the heavier the burden of responsibility—and your'n powers, Giant, be so great that they must rest upon the shoulders of . . . well, a giant."

"Then it's a good thing I am one," Timp smiled.

"Indeed. Let us hope you are strong enough to carry this gift."

"I'll do my best," Timp promised and Bjorn knew that he meant it.

"All the more reason for ye to arrive *on time* in the coming days."

"OK, I get it. What time should I get here?"

"It matters not. Whenever ye arrive, ye shall be late."

Yep, impossible business, arguing with a Viking.

And thus began Timp's training. Bjorn gathered the other Vikings to help fill the gaps of Timp's micro-Viking knowledge. He assigned each Viking a subject based on his or her area of expertise, and then divided Timp's day among these various experts.

"Aye, we's sending ye to Viking school," Gunnar lisped.

Gunnar was one of the "experts"—of what, Timp couldn't say. As far as he knew, berserking wasn't part of the core curriculum in school. After all, how much training did it take to jump up and down, smack your bottom, and make train noises?

Bjorn defined the roles of each tutor: As resident Giantologist, Fen would teach cultural studies. Erika would train Timp in hand-to-hand combat. Gunnar would demonstrate berserking, a.k.a. anger management—it turned out that berserking was in the core curriculum. Who knew? Aunt Dene would teach history. "She be so old most of it shall be from personal experience."

That comment earned Uncle Dene a sharp elbow to the ribs.

"I shall teach thee the ways of the Vaskrél," Bjorn said, "and O'dul shall teach thee . . ."

The Vikings stared at O'dul scratched their heads.

"About rocks?" O'dul said hopefully. O'dul loved rocks.

". . . how to quiet the mind," Bjorn finished tactfully.

"Oh, aye," O'dul agreed. "It's the best at that."

"Aye," Gunnar agreed. "O'dul's mind holds such quiet, ye might not even know 'tis there at all."

"Right!" O'dul smiled, proud to have a talent all his own.

"So, where do we start?" Timp asked.

"By stopping right there!" Hilmir interrupted. His Vaskrél convoy escorted him and his assistant on a wooden platform suspended by four ropes. "I decreed that this Jötunn is not to learn our'n secrets 'til he hath passed the rights to iViking."

"We understood thee to mean knowledge of magic from The Book of Secrets," Bjorn protested, "not training."

"Nay, it extends to *all* Viking knowledge."

"'Tis not what ye declared before witnesses."

"Well, I changed me mind. I now decree he must pass the trial of iViking, first."

"Trial? What trial?" Timp didn't like the sound of that.

"When shall he be granted his trial?"

"Now will suffice," Hilmir said with a smile.

Timp remembered they said something about some rights of passage, and he'd agreed, but he figured that was just memorizing some verses of a song (or maybe a bawdy limerick). He'd heard nothing about a trial. The last trial he'd had ended with a Viking army attacking him, the village burning, and a narrow escape across the pond. Trial: the word made Timp's eye twitch with PTSD. He looked to the hilmir, who smiled broadly. It was never a good when the hilmir smiled.

"Fine by me," Bjorn agreed without giving Timp so much as a glance.

"Wait. What? Now?"

"Me, as well." Hilmir smiled again. One smile was bad, but two smiles was murder. This was bad.

"Ready the gorkin!" Hilmir yelled, and the village sprang to life with excitement.

"Like, now? Right now?" This was so terribly bad.

"Ready the gorkin!" echoed the villagers into the distance.

The blueberry bushes sprang with life. Villagers slid down ropes and climbed up others. They chopped and sawed at limbs above. Vaskrél poured from their hidden hive, caught the falling limbs, and lowered them to a clearing on the ground. Other villagers took the limbs, sawed them to points, and drove the stakes into the ground, forming an oval pen with a fenced path that led to a cage in the thicket. Timp couldn't see what lay inside that cage, but his Sherlockian powers deduced that it might be the gorkin. "Ready the gorkin!" OK, it was Hilmir not Sherlock who told him. "Ready the gorkin!"

Timp wished he'd quit saying that.

"What's a gorkin?" Timp whispered to Bjorn.

"A gorkin be a gorkin."

"That's helpful. Thanks. And why are they readying it?"

"So that it shall be ready, Giant. Truly, ye be dumber than

—"

"I mean, for what purpose? Like, what do I do with it? Do I eat it?"

Bjorn looked back, impressed. "Aye, Giant. 'Twould be a most impressive way to win your'n first trial by battle."

"Wait, battle? Why do I battle?" So bad. So terribly bad.

"Cause ye accepted the trial to iViking."

"I've gotta stop agreeing to things," Timp muttered to himself before returning his attention to Bjorn. "Now? We're doing that now?"

"Aye, Giant," Bjorn confirmed. "Now."

CHAPTER 4

THE DAY OF SURPRISINGLY UNSURPRISING DISAPPOINTMENTS

While the villagers and Vaskrél built their battle pen of death, Timp tried to catch a glimpse of what lurked within the dark cage ten feet away. He couldn't see the beast, but he thought he could hear it breathing, waiting. What was it? The cage wasn't big enough to hold an alligator, coyote, or black bear—thank goodness for that—but it could hold a rabid bobcat, raccoon, squirrel, or even a flesh-eating bunny (and that's no joke). Fear climbed Timp's throat until it felt tight.

Villagers, Vikings, and Vaskrél poured from every corner and crevice. Some crawled from under rocks; some climbed out of holes. They threw down their pickaxes, hammers, and saws and dusted off their hands. All were eager for the sight of blood.

Timp knew that when the Vikings completed the pen, it'd be time to face the gorkin—whatever that was. Workers drove the last posts into the ground, completing the path from the cage to the tiny arena. Bonnie nuzzled Timp's neck to assuage his fear as villagers filled the arena. It was time.

"Summon the gorkin!" Hilmir called.

The villagers fell silent as the locks to the cage door clinked to the ground. Vaskrél lifted the gate slower than Timp felt was necessary. They loved seeing the giant squirm. The villagers trembled with exaltation. A metallic taste filled the back of Timp's throat.

"Summon the gorkin!" Hilmir called again and again.

"Gorkin! Gorkin! Gorkin!" the villagers chanted.

Timp didn't join them.

Once the cage was open, the Vaskrél tied back the door and hurried away.

"Bit over dramatic," Timp muttered to himself.

He'd seen firsthand what the Vaskrél could do. Whatever waited inside that cage couldn't possibly be worse than an angry hive of bee-riding Vikings. At least, that's what Timp told himself. After all, once you've already survived the worst, you've nothing to fear from what's to come. (It made sense, but Timp would be the first to admit that unsinkable logic hit an iceberg in the sea of reality. He was afraid.)

In the darkness of the cage, something stirred. A flash of red moved within the shadows: brilliant, ruby red. Timp couldn't recall ever seeing an animal that color. But then, he'd never seen a gorkin. He'd assumed "gorkin" was a Viking name for something familiar, the way "vicious guard beast" was Viking code for "cat,"

but what if a gorkin was something new and deadly? The horrors of the unknown arrested Timp's courage, and he stepped back.

"Steady on, Giant," Bjorn said from Timp's ear. "Have heart." When did he get in Timp's ear? *Sneaky Vikings*.

"Bring forth the gorkin!" Hilmir commanded. Timp was getting real tired of that.

Whips snapped inside the cage, and the beast stepped out, eyes flicking, and scales shinning in the sun. The fearsome gorkin — or, as Timp would call it, a common garden lizard throbbed its ruby throat, and then continued toward the arena. Timp laughed. *The lizard's throat, that's where the red came from.*

"Behold, the gorkin!" Hilmir declared with the gusto of a circus ringleader.

Timp laughed. "Gorkin? That's just a lizard." He reached down and grabbed the lizard before it reached the pen. "All I have to do is defeat this thing before I can iViking? No problem." Timp pulled back to toss the lizard.

"Wait!" Hilmir yelled, but it was too late.

The lizard smacked into a tree, landed with a *thunk*, and then scurried away looking quite peeved.

Timp dusted off his hands. "Gorkin defeated. Now, back for training. Bjorn?"

Hilmir turned red with fury. "Nay. Nay. Nay. Nay. *Nay!* That doth not count! Ye know not the rules!"

"Fine," Timp sighed. He had suspected that was too easy. "I'll catch it and defeat it again. Whatever."

Timp tromped through the bushes for an hour. Every time he got close, the lizard bolted away. He cursed, swore, and tried again. Finally, he caught it (or at least another lizard that looked like it) and brought it back to the hilmir. "Here."

"'Tis about time. Now, to iViking ye must fight as a Viking," Hilmir said, and then turned to the villagers. "He must fight as one of us."

The villagers cheered their approval. Timp didn't know what that meant, but if they wanted him to put on a helmet and talk silly, sure. He'd do it. Whatever.

"Bring forth yon cart!"

The hilmir's assistant and two villagers pulled a cart from behind the crowd. Something lay on the cart hidden beneath a blue and silver tarp. More and more Hilmir reminded Timp of DeLaney. *There really is one in every village.*

"Before ye face the gorkin, ye must first eat *this*:" Hilmir waved his hand and his assistant yanked away the tarp to reveal . . .

"A bean." This was shaping into a day of surprisingly unsurprising disappointments.

"Aye, a bean!" Hilmir barked, incredulous at Timp's lackluster tone. "One of three seeds magically altered by the

Keeper, Aunt Dene. Eat this and defeat the gorkin, and ye shall have earned the right to iViking."

"That's right. I forgot about the magical beans," Timp mocked. "Are these the same beans that Jack used to grow his magic beanstalk?" This was all becoming too absurd.

"You know with Norse history, Giant?" Fen asked, marking the fact down in his notebook.

"Um, if by 'Norse history,' you mean fairytales for children where a boy named Jack trades a cow for beans and grows a stalk into the sky to see a giant, then yeah, I know it." Timp rolled his eyes. Vikings were the craziest peoples.

"Ah, but you are mistaken, Giant." Bjorn said.

"'Twas a Norseman dubbed Jack the Giant Slayer, but he were no Jötunn. He was a Viking, blue and true. And the beans were not magical, nor the stalk spectacular, by your'n standards. After all, 'tis we who are on the side of Jack and you who are on the side of the giant, Giant."

Timp had to think about that one. It never occurred to him that Jack might be tiny and the giant the same height as himself.

"So, these beans will grow a giant bean stalk into the sky?"

"Nay. For thee, they shall do something far more extraordinary. But I must warn thee, the formula be not

yet stable," Aunt Dene said and then turned toward the hilmir. "I feel I must again protest—"

"Enough excuses!" Hilmir interrupted. "The Jötunn must eat the bean before the trial!"

"But your decree, my lord. By your own words, only a Viking may taste the magic of the Book of Secrets," Fen said to Hilmir. "The giant hath not yet defeated the gorkin and is therefore not yet a Viking. Thus, he cannot partake the magic from the Book of Secrets, cannot eat that bean, and his previous triumph over the gorkin doth stand!" The giantologist finished with a triumphant grin.

"Shut it, Fen."

Fen deflated back into Timp's ear, where Timp scooped him and the other Vikings out and placed them on his shoulder.

"And to your'n point," Hilmir's assistant chimed in, paging back through his notebook, "our'n esteemed and most honorable hilmir decreed that *without the consent of the hilmir*, only a Viking may taste the magic of the Book of Secrets. Thus, the solution be apparent. Mr. Hilmir, sire, do ye consent to allow yon giant to taste of this magic?"

"Oh, aye. I do consent it." Hilmir smirked.

"Brother, show compassion," Bjorn said. "The giant is but a simpleton, slow in mind, dull in wit. He knows not our ways."

"That was hurtful," Timp said.

"Father, this is most unreasonable." Ailsa said. Timp perked up. He still hadn't forgiven her for her betrayal, but it felt good to have her on his side. "The giant is a fool and soft." Actually, it didn't feel that good. "He is totally ill-suited for any Viking trial. Likely, he is incapable of completing even the most modest Viking task. I implore thee to reconsider."

Hilmir pretended to think about it. "No."

"Fine," Timp agreed. "Then it's settled." *Soft, huh? Fool, huh? Incapable, dimwitted, and Ill-suit-wearing, huh? I'll show them. Humph!* "The only thing beans give you is the farts. Oh, but you're right. They are a magical fruit, cause the more you eat, the more you toot." He reached down, grabbed the bean off the cart, and popped it into his mouth.

"Halt!" Bjorn called, but Timp had already swallowed. What did it matter? He didn't believe in magic.

Timp regretted his decision almost immediately. The bean had barely brushed his tongue before he swallowed, yet the taste exploded and compounded in his mouth. The worst part was that it didn't taste like a bean at all. It tasted like broccoli, and not regular broccoli. It tasted like broccoli times a million broccolis. The taste filled his nostrils and the back of his throat until his eyes burned, his scalp crawled back, and his stomach churned. He worried he'd get sick over the entire village. They'd be crushed under an enormous wave and drown in a flood of vomit.

Timp didn't know how anything could taste that bad, nor how the taste could linger that long after swallowing.

"Broccoli," he coughed to Aunt Dene. "Why'd you have to make it taste like broccoli?"

"All magic hath a price, Giant. It shall taste as whatever ye hate most and more'n."

She was right about that. There was nothing Timp hated more than broccoli. He scrunched his nose, smacked his lips, and stuck out his tongue, trying to shake the taste away. As the flavor faded, Timp began to feel strange, dizzy. His vision blurred.

Bjorn and the Vikings scrambled down Timp's shoulder. "Abandon Timp!"

Vaskrél flew up, caught them, and whisked away.

"Everyone is overreacting. There's no such thing as magic. There's no. Such. Thing. As. Magic." Timp suddenly felt heavy, as if gravity was growing stronger, pulling him down until he could no longer stand. He dropped onto his haunches and braced himself with his hands, but still, the world pulled.

"I think I'm going to be sick," he said as his stomach lurched into his feet. His eyes felt as if they might pop out of their sockets, so he closed them tight. "Bjorn, what's happening?"

If Bjorn answered, Timp didn't hear. His skull was being crushed like a tin can. The air squeezed out of his lungs, and he couldn't pull it back in. He was sinking to the bottom of the

ocean, compressed under the weight of a billion tons of water and drowning. Then, the pain was gone.

He opened his eyes and dug his fingers into the dark, rich soil as his vision steadied. Everything seemed back to normal until two heavy, leather-strapped boots stepped into view. Timp followed the boots up to a pair of brown breeches, dusted in blue. Belts crisscrossed in all directions and then disappeared under a blue-grey tunic. A man wearing a fur-lined helm stood over Timp with his grey beard braided like coarse rope. Purple tattoos circled his blue arms in intricate designs so thick that more tattoos shown than raw skin. But, that face. Timp knew that face.

"Bjorn?"

"Hello, Giant." Bjorn smiled as he helped Timp to his feet, and they both laughed. Bjorn was the giant now. He stood three feet taller than Timp—was it "feet"? Timp didn't know anymore. Everything he knew to be true was nothing but a thin veil hiding the extraordinary. Magic was real!

"Um, here. Aunt Dene thought ye may have need of these." Bjorn held out a pair of breeches, some boots, and a tunic.

Timp looked down and realized that he was quite naked. He'd shrunk to the size an ant, but his clothes had not. A cotton and denim mountain range stood behind him. He grabbed the clothes that Bjorn proffered and put them on as quickly as he could while still taking in his surroundings. "This is unbelievable."

Everything was the same, yet somehow changed. The sun seemed less bright, the air thicker, and the earth cooler. Trees twisted into the mist, higher than any sky scrapper he'd ever seen. Fen, Erika, Gunnar, O'dul, and the Denes ran over.

"This is unbelievable," Timp repeated, this time to Fen, who was the Viking nearest his own height (though, even Fen stood six inches over Timp).

A bee flew high above. Its motions seemed slowed, as if it moved through a substance thicker than air, but thinner than water. Timp took a deep breath. The air, which had been defined by the absence of matter only moments before—Timp realized—was a substance unto itself. There was no such thing as empty space. He was a fish, swimming in an ocean made of air.

Even time felt different. The bee moved in slow, elegant strokes, leaving ripples through the air in its wake.

"Magic is real."

Fen snorted back a laugh and pushed up his glasses. "Nay. Our'n magic is but a complex formula and corresponding chemical reactions, 'tis all. Magic just be science ye do not yet understand, Giant."

Timp laughed. He loved that they still called him "giant" even though they all towered over him now.

"Aww, he be yet too small for me to stab in his wee little nose," Erika said as she grabbed Timp's nose and pulled him

down into a headlock. It was like wrestling a Kodiak, only less hairy (slightly).

Timp broke free, but a bus struck him from behind and sent him flying off his feet—at least it felt like a bus. Timp flew higher and further than he thought possible. He was lighter than a feather. Gravity was different here too. *That* was how the Vikings jumped so high. This realization did much to increase his understanding of past events, but little to stop the pain of landing. Timp crashed into a pile of dirt and twisted around to find a mass of black and yellow fur. What kind of bus had fur? His heart filled with joy. This was no bus. It was Bonnie!

"Easy, girl. Easy. I'm not as big as I used to be," Timp laughed as the enormous bee nuzzled him into the ground.

He squeezed out from under Bonnie and hugged her head. She was gorgeous. Her eyes were so ponderously deep that they seemed at the same time both purple and black. Fur sprang from her body in tufts of black, brown, yellow, and white. Her wings shimmered, glass made cloth: transparent, with streaks purple, blue, and pink moving through them like oil on water. Timp ran his fingers through her fur. His bee. Her person. His vígbý. Her rider.

"Allo, not so giant, Giant," Ailsa said as she stepped out of the mist. So much mist... Was it still summer? Where had this mist come from?

Ailsa was the only thing that could have pulled Timp's eyes from Bonnie. He could see her more clearly than he ever could through the magnifying glass. Small, purple tattoos circled her arms. None hid her face, and what a face: beautiful blue skin that glowed and eyes of emerald green. No. Timp broke eye contact. *How about that mist? Where had that come from, again?* His cheeks flushed hot. He was supposed to be mad at her, but how could he feel anything beyond excitement and awe in a world like this?

"Hello," he stammered, but before he could say more, the hilmir arrived, hawking a revenge loogie.

He fired it at Timp.

Timp was smaller now, but no slower. He ducked, and the loogie missed his face, grazing his shoulder, instead. *Gross.*

"Vengeance be mine," Hilmir said.

Bonnie buzzed in fury. "It's OK, girl. It's OK," Timp said as he pet her back. Bjorn handed him a rag and Timp wiped the spit away. "I probably deserve that. After all, it was nowhere near as bad as the one I delivered." He hawked and the hilmir recoiled in post-traumatic loogie terror. Even the bravest balk at spit so large that it can knock a man off his feet and smack him against a wall. Yep, all things considered, Timp had gotten off easy.

"Ye deserve that and more," Hilmir answered. "Ready yerself to meet your'n fate, Jötunn."

Timp had all but forgotten the gorkin. The arena, which stood a few feet away before, now towered through the mist in the distance, an enormous coliseum. Timp couldn't see the beast within, but he could hear it move. He could hear its feet pounding the ground.

"Not so brave now. Eh, Jötunn?" Hilmir chided.

"Father, I say again, this be most unjust. He hath no training. We gift our'n warriors blade before bottle. They art raised for this trial. Ye cannot expect a soft skinned, weakling giant to defeat a gorkin."

"Hey!" Timp objected. "I can hear you."

"He hath agreed to the terms, Daughter. The writs of Odin stand. His right of passage is decided and secured."

"But, Father, entire classes of Norse children take this trial together. 'Tis insanity to expect a child to take the gorkin alone. Furthermore, the gorkin is unmuzzled. No Norse child hath ever defeated the gorkin unmuzzled."

"Then the Jötunn should have no trouble, for he is no Norse child. But fear not, daughter of mine, for he be 'the great rider of the one true Gullvindr. *The chosen one.*'"

Timp didn't appreciate the hilmir's mocking laughter. In fact, Timp was quickly getting annoyed with this whole conversation.

"Father, those are but tales. Ye've seen this giant. He is weak and clumsy. You send him to slaughter."

Soft skinned, weakling, clumsy, and untrained. Timp had heard enough. "I'm not scared of a stupid lizard, Ailsa."

"Ye see, Daughter, the giant fears not, and we are all agreed. Let us be done with this."

For once, Timp agreed with Hilmir.

Hilmir started toward the coliseum. Ailsa rolled her eyes at Timp and followed. "Father! Father!"

"Knew I that you were giant, Giant, but when we shrunk yer body, we must have forgot to shrink yer—that is, eh, yer bravery," Bjorn said when Hilmir and Ailsa were out of earshot. Bjorn explained that most Norse children going iViking fought the gorkin in groups of 10-12, and with a muzzle across the lizard's snout. Timp asked why, and Bjorn laughed. "If we did not, we'd have no children left."

"That's comforting. So, then why do I have to fight the gorkin alone and without a muzzle?"

"Cause ye agreed to. Most brave of ye, Giant, most brave." Bjorn slapped Timp on the back proudly. "Ye must truly long to sit at Odin's table in Valhöll."

Timp really needed to stop agreeing to things he didn't understand.

The villagers cheered him on as he moved through the crowd, grabbing him, and pushing him forward until somehow he found himself standing in the arena alone and holding a spear. A door shut behind him. Arena, he almost had to laugh.

When he'd been a giant, this "arena" was nothing more than a tiny pen for a lizard. Now, it was a fighting pit for a monster.

The gorkin remained hidden in the mist, but Timp heard its breathing and its claws scratching into the dirt. He felt the ground shake with each step. He clinched his spear until his knuckles turned white.

Bjorn, Ailsa, Erika, and the other Vikings pushed to the front of the crowd and shouted advice through the sharpened logs that formed the arena wall. "Aim for the stomach, Giant." "Its belly be its soft spot." "Get under it, and you remove its advantage." "Aim steady. Aim true."

Bonnie hovered nearby. Timp made her promise not to interfere. Per the hilmir's instructions, it was forbidden to use the aid of your vígbý when facing the gorkin. Timp wished she could at least stand next to him.

"The stomach. Aim for the stomach," Timp told himself.

He listened for the beast, but heard nothing: no breathing, no clawing, no sounds at all.

Maybe it escaped, he thought, but that feeble hope crumbled when an ear-shattering screech erupted from the mist. Air circled through the cloud and the ground shook: *STOMP! STOMP!* The gorkin's claws scraped against rocks like nails on a chalkboard. Timp still couldn't see the beast, but he felt its presence. He wished it would charge. At least then, death would

be faster, but the gorkin didn't charge. It walked—*STOMP!*
STOMP! STOMP!—a slow death march out of the mist.

Timp dropped his spear. The ridges of the beast's back stood like mountains. Dead skin hung from its green and grey scales—a sign that the reptile had recently molted, recently grown. How was that possible? It already reached ten stories tall. Its head tilted and its chin rose. A wet, ink-black ball circled in a sickly yellow ring and bore down on Timp. He wondered if the lizard recognized him as the giant who threw it into a tree earlier . . . He hoped not. The eye blinked, creating the smacking sound of a watermelon being pulled apart. The beast screeched again. This was no lizard. It was a dinosaur.

Timp picked up his spear. "The stomach. Aim for the stomach," he reminded himself.

"Get him, Giant! Tear him apart!"

"The stomach. Be brave. Get close. Aim for the stomach."

He dug his right foot into the ground for traction, mustered his courage, and screamed, "To Valhöll!"

The villagers went wild.

Timp charged with his spear held high over his head. Each step threw him five paces. It felt like he was running on the moon. He leapt higher and higher: 10 feet, 20. *Aim for the stomach? Yeah, right!* Timp bet he could jump straight into the beast's eye. *That's where I should aim!* Timp shoved off the ground and soared through the air. He pulled his spear back and roared.

The crowd cheered in unison. "Timp! Timp! Tim—"

And then a pink bolt shot from the gorkin, hit Timp in the face, and pulled him into the lizard's mouth with a resounding smack. The villagers stared the spear bounced on the arena floor, marking the spot where a gorkin ate a giant.

CHAPTER 5

LET'S PAWS AND RE-EVALUATE

Mrs. Molly Kitty-cat Cannonball marched toward the Littletons', cursing in a fit of rage. Damp fur shot out in all directions, her nails were sore and filed down to dull round nubs, and her eyes were bloodshot and weary. *"Stupid, nasty, no good, rotten grumpies. I'll kill them all. I won't rest until each and every one of them has suffered a slow and painful death, and my kingdom is free of this pestilence. I'm a queen!"*

Mrs. Littleton walked ahead with two buckets full of berries.

"You there, Chambermaid. You're just the person that I hoped to see."

"Why hello, Molly," Mrs. Littleton answered. "You look terrible. Did some sleepy little kitty-cat fall asleep in the barn, again?"

"No, you idiot. Do I look like someone who would sleep in a barn? I'm a queen, you imbecile, not some filthy barn cat, but rest assured, I will punish the nasty, no good, little grumpies responsible. Mark my words. I will peel off their skin like grapes and swallow their

children whole, then burn their lands and claim the ruins in the name of Molly the Grumpy Slayer—not in the sense that I’m grumpy, but I slay grumpies. Why? Because they make me so mad . . . OK, I guess I’m grumpy too.” Molly giggled in delight, and then she remembered the purpose of her visit. *“And it’s on that business that I’m seeing you now, human. A horrible plague of vermin have infested my kingdom. Do you know that?”*

As Molly spoke, Mrs. Littleton unstrapped the buckets from her hips and laid the straps over the porch banister. Molly waited for a response, but the chambermaid said nothing. Molly continued. *“They have declared war against me but proven themselves too formidable to conquer alone. Yes, it’s a true leader who admits when she needs assistance. I’ve decided to seek allies in our neighboring lands. Maybe there’s a king or queen willing to lend a paw. After all, if these grumpies spread from my lands, they may reach theirs. So, I will be away for a while.”*

Mrs. Littleton opened the back door and held it for the meowing cat. Molly sat on her haunches and continued. *“I’d ask my cousin the lion to come rule in my stead, but he’s busy with his own kingdom. He’s the king of the jungle, you know. I’m asking you to maintain my palace until I return.”*

Molly stared at Mrs. Littleton, who continued to hold the door.

“Well? Are you coming in or aren't you?” Mrs. Littleton asked.

"No, you insipid servant! I just told you I'm going to travel to the adjoining lands to seek allies who can vanquish my foes and rid my lands of this pesty pestilence. Weren't you listening?"

Mrs. Molly and Mrs. Littleton stared at one another.

"I can't wait here all day, Molly. In or out," Mrs. Littleton said.

"Stupid, idiotic human, I am your queen! You will listen to me. I'll say it slowly so you can understand. I am going away. I wish to return to a bed of catnip and a bowl of tuna . . . sprinkled with catnip and possibly some little blue grumps."

"Well, if you don't want in, what do you want? I see you have food in your bowl."

"Wretched, horrible human! Why do you refuse to learn the exquisite language of Cat's Meow? You know what? Forget it. After I rid my kingdom of these blue pests, I'll rid it of you too. How's that?"

The staring continued.

"Fine! Fine! Well, don't expect me to write. So long, Chambermaid!" Molly said, but as usual, all Mrs. Littleton heard was, *"Meow. Meow,"* and of course, *"Meow."*

Molly marched away, the first steps of a great adventure.