

A Gob and Her Stone

Prequel to *A Gob-Queen's Request* - Kim Rinzley

It had been a few weeks since Gob-Queen Debby had sent an extremely convincing impostor to the dungeons. Things were running relatively smoothly, with Debby and the Goblands Council taking care of the business of running a prosperous nation. Debby took to the role of Gob-Queen naturally, which to anyone outside of the council and the rest of the Goblands would have otherwise raised an eyebrow or two. After all, the person whom everyone hailed as Gob-Queen was in fact the actual impostor.

It was early summer and the nights had begun to grow hot. Debby lay awake in the middle of the night, tossing and turning in the heat. Normally she would ring her servant bell to call for someone to bring her a lighter duvet or turn up the cooling mechanism that ran through her castle. But this night was not only permeated by hot air, but also thoughts of guilt. Ever since the real Gob-Queen had been dealt with, Debby had occasionally felt a pang of guilt from time to time. She had reflected internally on how she had ended up as the ruler of the Goblands, all as part of an elaborate plan to steal the riches of the real Gob-Queen while she had conveniently been missing from her homeland. The criminal friends that Debby had betrayed did not bother her too much, they were never her friends in truth, just occupational acquaintances. But the fate of the real Gob-Queen still bothered Debby.

As Debby stared at the ceiling above, dead-tired of being dead-tired, she heard a faint whisper of a song echoing from outside her bed chamber. She had heard it before. When sitting in meetings with the council or when having dinners with visiting nobles, a fleeting tune caught her attention if only for a moment. But this time, the tune persisted. Annoyed with her bout of insomnia, she rose to her green feet and donned a silken bathrobe. She opened the bedroom doors and began following the mysterious song through the candle-lit castle halls. Tired as she was, she meandered downwards until she found herself in front of a massive gilded vault door. In her groggy state she remembered that this particular part of the castle was never touched when she demanded to have her home rebuilt to her specifications. Though at the time she could never explain why. She looked curiously at the door, remembering also that she had no idea of how to open it. But in the tired, half-awake state she suffered, she felt a desire in her heart to open the door that she had never felt before.

Images in her mind's eye danced of her holding an ornate golden key in her hand, lifting it to the keyhole and pressing it in. She twisted the key around and heard how an uncountable amount of bolts clicked and clacked out of their sockets. The door swung forward and revealed a moderately sized room with black marble walls, floors and ceiling. From that ceiling hung a glass orb that flittered awake with light and revealed numerous odd and dusty artefacts that leaned against the walls. And at the very center of the room stood a white marble pedestal that reached up only as far as Debby's own chest. And atop that pedestal floated a golden egg-shaped jewel the size of a melon. Her eyes blinked rapidly as she realized that this was not a dream. It was not a dream at all. She had, through some strange dream-magic, conjured up the key to the vault and opened it.

“Hello, Gob-Queen.”

Someone or something had spoken to her. She looked frantically around herself. In the mess of ancient knick-knacks that surrounded her, nothing stood out.

“Is someone there?” She asked as she turned to face the way she had arrived from.

“Yeah, hi. I’m right here.” The voice casually replied.

“What? Where? Who are you?” Debby’s voice cracked with worry. She should have told a guard to escort her! Speaking of which, where were the guards or the night staff? She had probably wandered for fifteen minutes all the way from her bedroom to this vault.

“Nah, don’t worry so much. You’re probably safer right now than you’d be with a thousand guards protecting you.” The voice carried on with nary a concern to its tone.

“Show yourself! As Gob-Queen, I demand that you reveal yourself right now!” Debby shouted loud enough that any guard on patrol should have heard her. But the situation she was in wouldn’t let anyone other than she and that strange voice hear her.

“Okay, just look at the center of the vault, please. I know how it looks but I’m right here.”

Debby turned to face the gold-coloured jewel with both concern and curiosity painted across her face.

“Y-you’re the jewel?”

“Yeah, I’m a Cornerstone of the Realm. One of the most powerful artefacts that any mortal could get their hands on. Call me Dorian, please. It’s what your mother used to call me. I always like it better than fricking Jared.”

Debby faced the stone and looked intently at it, as if she searched for her own reflection to make sure that she didn’t look like she had just lost her mind.

“You... are a stone... that talks?”

“Yeah, I mean if that impresses you, you should listen up because that’s probably the least impressive thing I can do. Now do you mind if I tell you what’s up with this whole ordeal?”

Debby remained in silent awe. Talking to large jewels was not on her expectations for the night.

“Wait, hold up now. My mother? I should probably tell you-”

“That you’re not actually related to the Gob-Queens of the past, yeah I know. I know your deadname and all that stuff. I know you love being Gob-Queen and I know that despite your birth as a Humie, you always had the spirit of a *true Gob-Queen*.”

“Wha-what does that mean?” Debby began to fear that she was about to be revealed for the charlatan she was. She would have to run away. Pretend that she was some anonymous Goblin woman rather than go back to being a dumb Humie man.

“It means that there was a reason you in particular was led onto this path and eventually became Gob-Queen. Sure, it would have been less awkward if you had somehow been able to create your own Gob-Queen persona rather than inherit Debby’s, but in this Realm, we take what we get. Alright?”

“I guess...” At this point, Debby decided to simply go with the flow. There was something oddly relaxing about Dorian’s casual manner of speech.

“Great, now if you don’t mind. I gotta talk to you about what this whole thing is about.”

Dorian stopped for a moment as if waiting for Debby to let them continue.

“Uh, go on, Dorian. Please.”

“Thank you. So anyway here’s the deal. I’m a Cornerstone of The Seventh Realm. I can’t tell you how I or any of my brethren came to be, but our deal is that we exist to safeguard the destiny of the Realm. My personal deal is that I am able to tell you about my powers and advise you on some rather important business that’ll happen soon unless we do something about it. So first of all, do you know the history of the Goblins?”

The Gob-Queen looked at the stone in a state that was partially perplexed and partially unamused. Was this rock actually going to give her a history lesson in the middle of the night?

“I’ll take that as a no. But don’t worry, I’ll try to keep this brief. It all started around nine hundred or maybe a thousand years ago, I can’t quite remember the details but I do know that it was couple hundred before the Humans migrated from the island of Fylthe to the Continent.”

“Wasn’t that also a thousand years ago?” Debby was no historian, even before she became Gob-Queen, but everyone knew that Humans were not native to the Continent like Goblins, Elves, Orcs and the other *Kinde*. And it was known, or at least taught, that Humans came to the Continent around a thousand years ago.

“A thousand? Nah, no way. I may not remember the specifics here, but if Humans had arrived on the continent at that point I would have remembered it.”

“How so?”

Upon that simple question the stone was made uncharacteristically quiet for a moment.

“... You know, that really doesn’t matter, haha.” The stone chuckled nervously, hoping that Debby wouldn’t enquire further before they continued their speech. “Anyway, regardless of the specific dates, I was discovered all those years ago by a Goblin girl who helped put you

Goblins onto the path of destiny that you're on right now. Back then, Goblins looked nothing and behaved nothing like you do today. They were scrawny, thin-looking little critters, pretty similar to Gremlins except even those old Goblins wouldn't piss on people's carpets for fun. They'd be too scared of what the greater *Kinde* would do to them. In fact, Goblins back then were so scared of the other races that they rarely interacted with them, staying in the shadows and sewers. They had no dignity or grace, nothing like you do now. They lived off the scraps and detritus of the greater *Kinde* and were perpetually a lesser kindred. Until, as I said, I was discovered by a young Goblin girl, the first Gob-Queen."

The stone lingered on that last sentence to let the impact set in on Debby, whose eyes lit up with noticeable interest.

"Ah, yeah. I can see that twinkle in your eyes. You're starting to realize that there's something to my story, right? Yeah, anyway. I told that young girl about my powers and although her primitive Goblin mind didn't quite understand what I said, she did understand enough to use me to make all Goblins smarter as well as give all of them a sense of pride and dignity. In an instant, all Goblins across the Realm had a mental awakening and collectively chose to stop living in the filth of the greater *Kinde* and subsiding on their garbage. The young girl felt the same change and immediately came to fully understand the scope of my powers. She tried to call on my powers to alter the world itself, but I can't do that. Some of my brethren can, but my powers only extend to the *Kinde* of the one that possesses me. Still a pretty good deal though?"

"I would say that's not a bad deal, yeah." Debby's mind raced with all the new facts that Dorian had told her and just as they began their next sentence, Debby quickly interjected. "Hold on! I have the power to alter all of Gob-kind?"

"Uhm, it's rude to interrupt people-er-Cornerstones, but yes. You can use my powers to alter all Goblins to your own desires. But before you start doing that, you should probably listen to the end of my story. And besides, can you really come up with any improvements to the way that Goblins exist in the Realm right now? If you'll allow me to continue on, you'll see that the way you Gobbos look and behave is pretty much perfect."

The Gob-Queen wanted to disagree, but as she searched her mind for improvements she'd like to commit to her race, she came up with nothing. So she quietly nodded for Dorian to keep going.

"Two more changes that the first Gob-Queen asked for was to make Goblin society matriarchal. That was a pretty good change all things considered. Back then, Goblins were the lowest of the low to the other races and to the male Goblins, lady Goblins were even lower. That poor girl, as well as all other Goblin women, had been horribly abused by their male counterparts. So in another instant, Goblin women took the roles as leaders of their tribes while the men stepped back. But you should know that even though the Gob-Queen had the power to make Goblins stronger, larger and smarter than all other races and that she could have made all male Goblins fully subservient to their mothers and sisters, she was humble enough to leave things at a modest level. Goblin men wouldn't be abused like they had abused the Goblin women, they would just let the ladies speak first and listen to them. I always admired that in her. She could have turned Goblins into the most powerful and

dominant kindred in the Realm, but she felt like that wouldn't actually lead to a peaceful existence for her kind. She saw that if she tried to make Goblins an imperialist power that lived to conquer the Realm, it would only lead to pain and suffering for not just the other races, but for Gobkind too."

The words that Dorian told Debby explained so much. Goblins were known in the realm for being relatively pacifistic compared to the other kindred. She did command an army of mercenaries in the Goblands, but they were for defensive purposes. In fact, aside from a scattering of small bands of mercenaries, Goblins had never been involved in any of the greater conflicts of the Realm.

"The other change this girl committed to Gobkind was that no Goblin except her direct female descendants would ever know I existed. If one of your Goblin servants strolled by right now, they wouldn't see or hear me. She asked for this change because, clever girl that she was, she knew that if other Goblins were to know about me, they'd war for ownership of me until there were no Goblins left. Again, for a primitive Goblin, she was super smart!"

"But..." It pained the vainglorious Debby to admit it, but she knew that despite having assimilated the identity of the real Gob-Queen Debby to a level that almost reached parody, she wasn't actually a descendant of any Gob-Queens. "I'm not one of her descendants."

"Yeah, I know. That's what's so freaky about Humans. You are- well, *you were*, completely fricked up compared to the other races. My brethren and I have tried to understand what the deal is with Humans ever since they first discovered the Continent, because the way our powers affect Humans break from how they should work. Regardless, even though you're not a blood relative to any of the previous Gob-Queens, you are a Gob-Queen in spirit. Speaking to you now is way more comfortable than it was speaking to the woman you locked in the dungeons. Speaking of which, when I'm done telling you what you need to know, you really ought to use my powers to plug that leak, if you know what I mean?"

Debby nodded, feeling content that she might do right with the real Gob-Queen later.

"So after the first Gob-Queen committed all these changes to Gobkind, she lived out her life in peace as an honored member of her Goblin community, eventually becoming their leader and having several children. The oldest daughter would inherit me and like her mother, she was also wise in not over-exploiting my abilities. And so, Goblins would slowly gain a more favorable reputation among the other *Kinde* as they integrated into their communities and nations. Eventually, through my presence, the Goblin community that was led by the Gob-Queens grew more distinct and more influential. Together, we created the bedrock of what would become modern day Goblin culture and eventually the Goblands as well. Now don't take the next part as anything negative. I hold no prejudices against you Goblins, but as the Gob-Queens made sure that Goblins were always living in safety, Goblins kinda... they kinda grew decadent and hedonistic. Later Gob-Queens would use me to warp the appearances of Goblins from skinny, hunchbacked critters with tails and sharp tusks into what you look like today. Cute, sexy, curvy, these were traits that Gob-Queens developed over generations to create a specific look that made you desirable to the other races while maintaining a unique Goblin look for you to feel proud of."

"We had tusks?"

"Yeah, I think originally Goblins and Orcs had some kinda connection. Paradoxically it makes both more sense and no sense now after that thing that happened to the Orcs and Elves a year ago, but whatever."

Dorian took a moment before continuing to talk. There was a change in their tone following his answer to Debby's question, as if to emphasize the importance of what they were about to say next.

"Look, this next thing is probably the most important thing about you Goblins. You see, even though Goblins had become respected, attractive and influential in the Realm thanks to me and the Gob-Queens, they were still kind of a footnote in the Realm's story. The Orcs had their Khanates, the Elves had their forests and when the Humans came, they created their *nations*. Goblins kinda just hung around the other races, relying on them for protection and for work. That changed with your great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmother, Gob-Queen Nellie. She used my powers to make Goblins absurdly lucky. Great fortune always follows Goblins, as I'm sure you're aware."

"Again, not my actual relative, right?" Debby interjected.

"Huh? Who cares about specifics like that? That's the problem with the way you mortals, and especially Humies, think all the time, you get caught up in trivial minutiae. Like I said, as far as I care, you're the Gob-Queen now, and whether that makes you a literal descendant of the first Gob-queen or just a spiritual descendant is irrelevant since her call to make sure only her descendants could see me makes you the fricking Gob-queen. Get it? You're the Gob-Queen now, nothing's gonna change that!"

Debby paused for a moment. For the short while she had possessed the identity of the Gob-Queen, she had for the most part drunk the experience like a pleasant brew. She had lost herself in the role like the method actor she once was. But occasionally tinges of guilt sparked free from the deep recesses of her mind. Not guilt towards the real Gob-Queen, but towards herself. Questions sometimes raced in her mind, demanding to know why she felt so at home as Debby.

She remembered her time as a Human thief, her role in her gang was always to drink potions or cast glamours that turned her into someone else. Opera singers, chefs, maids and so on. She had kept it to herself, lest her dumb companions would give her grief for it, but she always felt liberated when she assumed a gender that was not the one she had been assigned. And it always felt like a betrayal to herself when she had to cease pretending to be someone else for her previous job. There was a part of her, deep within her heart that always broke when she had to assume her assigned gender. Being the Gob-Queen was not just enjoyable because of the perks of being the Gob-Queen. The wealth, the pampering, the utter carelessness she could hold every morning, it all came second to the fact that as Gob-Queen, no one could tell her to go back. Being short and green may not have been what she would have chosen many years ago. But being a woman? That would be her choice no matter what.

“Anyway, as I said, you Goblins are all really lucky. And that’s a good trait to have, because things in the Realm are about to reach a critical stage.” Dorian continued with a serious tone.

“What do you mean?”

“So by now you know that I have some serious powers, right? But here’s the other important thing, I’m not the only Cornerstone of the Realm. There are a few dozen or so of my brethren, and they each have powers similar to mine. And they have been messed with recently a fair deal more than is normal. Usually one of us is used every hundred or so, but just over the last two years, it’s happened three times. And the changes that have happened are great and dire. The more this happens, the more people will inevitably learn of our existence and powers. And that’s how the other Realms were destroyed. Gods, mortals and dragons all fought to control the Cornerstones to control the Realm’s destiny as they pleased. And I can sense that it’s happening again.”

“But... What could I do about that? The Goblands aren’t a big empire, we lease these lands from the Orcish nobles in Mint. We have no industry of war.” Debby spoke with doubt and fear in her voice. As Gob-Queen, she did have plenty of influence across the Realm, but it was true that the Goblands had little chance in a war. Something that was always avoided thanks to the uncanny luck of the Goblins.

“Nooo, but you have *money*. And that crazy luck of yours.” Dorian’s sardonic tone carried through the fearful seriousness that had colored his voice up until this point.

“Listen, Deb. I know it’s gonna sound far-fetched, but you and I are the best chances the Realm has to avoid a catastrophic end just like the last Realms did. And I know how we can give it a fighting chance. But only if you’re willing to trust me on this, okay?”

Debby sighed and allowed herself a moment to think. Apprehension filled her mind. Not apprehension towards Dorian, but aimed towards herself and the Goblands. Could she really do this? Could she help save the Seventh Realm?

“You... can trust me, Dorian.” She answered, resigning herself to a fate that would go down in history.

“Thank you, Gob-Queen Debby.” Despite not having a face, Dorian’s tone carried a relieved smile. “Here’s what you need to do for starters. You need to find a Nightlady in Tenshyr named Hui Wei. Despite her ancestry, she’s the key to protecting the Realm from her own kind, who are the Realm’s greatest threat. You can trust her, I promise that despite her being one of the Nightfolk, you *can* trust her.”

“Hui Wei. A Nightlady in Tenshyr. What makes her so special?”

“Like you, she used to be a Human. But she was changed by one of my brethren. If your people find her, you need to make sure she brings the stone with her. You can’t let a Cornerstone remain in the open. If the Nightfolk of Morundine find one, all hell will break loose. And at that point you’re not going to be able to protect the Realm, only try to survive it breaking.”

Debby nodded seriously, allowing Dorian to continue their speech.

“Hui Wei is your first priority. Send people to find her tomorrow morning. When she comes here, you have to let her speak to me. Your second task is to send a letter to a mercenary in North Galria, instructing them to come to the Goblands and fast. There’s an inkwell and a black quill somewhere in the mess around me, write the letter with those instruments. Don’t worry about what to write, the inkwell and the quill will do the job for you. When that mercenary arrives here, they will be someone very dear and important to you. But you can’t tell them anything about this plan until I tell you to. They can be trusted as well, but it’s for their safety that you can’t tell them anything.”

The second task confused Debby, but at this point she was ready to trust Dorian.

“And your last task for now is to send some agents to Vigil. There are a few youngsters there that follow a woman with a very special rapier. At some point later they will be some very solid allies to the cause and not having their help will be felt. When all of this has been done, you and miss Wei will need to speak with me again, and hopefully that’s early enough to prevent certain disaster. You got all that?”

“Find Hui Wei in Tenshyr. Send a letter to a mercenary in North Galria. And send some agents to Vigil to keep an eye on some kids with a magical rapier.” Debby nodded and made sure that the tasks were etched into her mind. She resolved even to write them down when she returned to her bedroom.

“Good enough. Any questions for me?”

Debby thought for a second and came up with a few questions.

“Do the agents in Tenshyr have to keep a low profile?”

“Shouldn’t matter to be honest, they’re brave and strong but they’re not particularly smart. Just make sure that your agents have plenty of money to bail them out when the need arises.”

“How much time do we have to do all of this?”

“If your full change into the Gob-Queen hadn’t taken so long, I would have preferred to have told you this when you first entered the castle.”

Understanding the seriousness and urgency, Debby felt ashamed to ask one more thing.

“Gotcha. Oh and one more thing actually. What do we do with the... real Gob-Queen?”

“Well, I can affect not just all Goblins, but specific individuals too. And honestly, Deborah downstairs deserves better than the dungeons. She never even wanted to be Gob-Queen, that’s why she left. But she’s clever enough to be a really good treasurer.”

“Wouldn’t she mind being changed like that? Isn’t doing this against her will?”

“I think that if you just go to her and explain the deal, let her simmer in it for a while, she’ll understand. And I don’t mean I’ll change her mind or anything, I meant that I can change her history as it’s perceived by all other Goblins. She’ll get a new identity, a highly respected noble woman. Inside she’ll be the same person as always, but no one other than the two of you will know who she once was. Just make sure you apologize. Oh, and if you want to get on her good side, she really likes purple raspberry jam.”

That last detail confounded Debby, but then again, much of this conversation had been puzzling. But regardless, Debby felt at ease, knowing now that she was safe as the woman she was and that her poor predecessor would be given a new lease on life. She thanked Dorian for their information and rummaged through the dusty knick-knacks of the vault, finding weird but seemingly worthless items like toys and bad paintings. Eventually she found the inkwell and the black quill Dorian had told her about. Both items looked just as insignificant as the other things in the vault. But with the two in hand, she thanked Dorian again before leaving the vault and locking it with the golden key she had mysteriously acquired earlier.

Dorian thanked her in return and wished her all the luck with the three tasks they had given her. To which Debby replied with a smile:

“What Goblin isn’t lucky?”

- The End -