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Opening extract from

Will Gallows and the Snake-Bellied Troll

Written by

Derek Keilty

Published by

Andersen Press Ltd

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WILL GALLOWS

& THE SNAKE-BELLIED TROLL



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Andersen Press • London

First published in 2011 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 84939 236 5

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon CR0 4TD

To my wife, Elaine,
with love



★ THE GREAT WEST ROCK ★

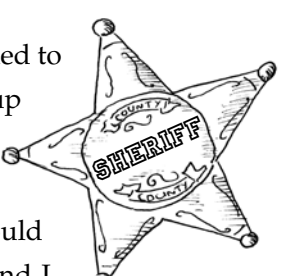


CHAPTER ONE

★

Gathering Storm

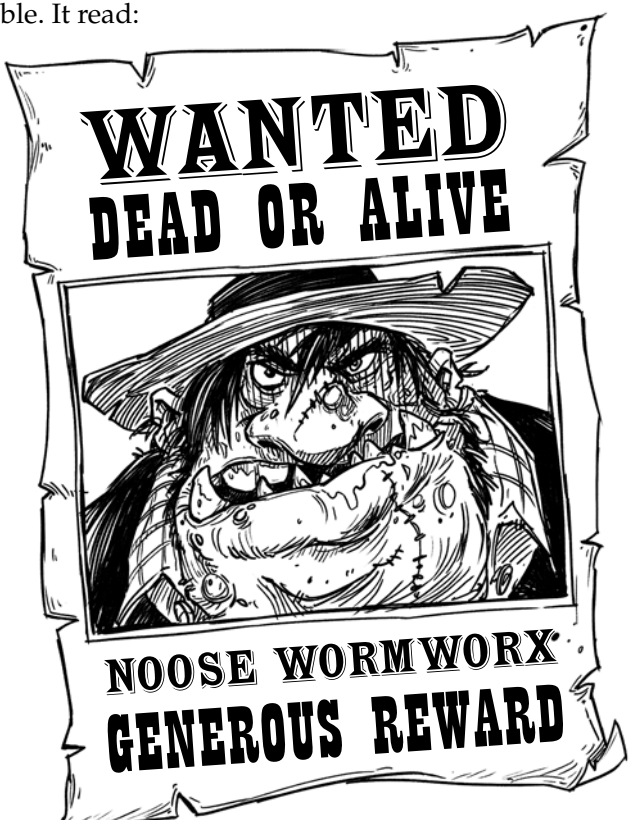
Tying up my horse, Moonshine, I walked slowly towards Oretown's sheriff's office. A display of wanted posters – a grisly gallery of wart-covered trolls and bulbous-eyed goblins – hung pinned to a notice board beside the office door. I plucked off the ugliest troll, rolling him up. Then, taking a deep breath, I pushed open the door.



Inside, the fat sheriff – a tin star pinned to his chest – was lounging with his feet up on the desk, and both he and a whip-tail goblin in the corner cell seemed to be having a competition to see who could snore the loudest. Nerves gripped me and I hesitated, feeling my heart hammer against my ribcage.

I thought about leaving but realised that wouldn't get me answers, and I wanted answers more than I wanted anything else on the rock. I took a seat, staring at the soles of the sheriff's boots, and waited.

When the sheriff finally woke, he pushed up the brim of his hat and scowled at me. I unrolled the wanted poster of the ugly, snake-bellied troll on the table. It read:



The sheriff glanced at it. 'Just take it, kid, most folkss don't even ask,' he growled. 'Then get lost.'

'It's not the poster I want, Sheriff Slugmarsh,' I replied. 'I . . . I need some information.'

'Information, what sort of information?'

'Whatever you can tell me about this murdering snake-belly.'

Slugmarsh belched loudly, tipping his hat back down over his eyes. A broad grin snaked its way across his face. 'Why? Are you going to bring him in for me?'

'Yes,' I replied, struggling to keep my voice steady.

The grin dropped off his face quicker than a rock bat off a mine-tunnel roof.

'I'm riding out after him,' I went on. 'I'm no killer, though. I'll be bringing him in alive.'

Slugmarsh pulled his legs off the desk and sat up to gawk at me. Then he laughed loudly, choking on his amusement, and spluttered and spat, trying to catch his breath.

I'd figured he'd do that. I sat silently, waiting for him to finish.

'You're crazy, kid. Go back to school before I call the truancy goblin!'

'I'm almost fourteen,' I said, deepening my voice. 'I don't go to school.'

'Quit school to take up bounty slaying?'

'Pretty much, though I prefer "bounty seeker" – like I said, I'm no killer.'



Slugmarsh sat forward, reached into a drawer and pulled out a bottle of Boggart's Breath whiskey. He took a long swig before slamming it onto the table, squashing a bug. To my bewilderment, the sheriff then drew his six-shot blaster and pointed it directly at me. 'If I thought for a second you were playing me for an idiot, boy . . .'

I felt my heart gallop even faster inside my chest and I raised my hands defensively. 'All I want is some information.'

Slugmarsh re-holstered the gun and took another swig of liquor. He stood up and trudged over to check on the corner cell. The goblin still slept soundly on the lower bunk. I was sure I detected a jealous look on Slugmarsh's face. When he sat down again, he asked, 'You got a name?'

'Gallows, Will Gallows.'

'Gallows. I had a deputy name o' Gallows . . .'

'My pa.'

I stiffened as Slugmarsh leaned forward like he was inspecting me. His mouth dropped open and I saw a gold tooth glint among a mouthful of broken and missing teeth; his breath smelled of old socks. 'You're Gallows's boy?'

'Yessir.'

'Well now.' Slugmarsh took off his hat and swept a few sweaty strands of white hair up over his bald head, until they looked like a bunch of scorched tangleweed clinging to a rock. 'Last time your pa brought you in here, you were only half the size you are now.' He paused, dropping his eyes. 'Reckon it was around this time last year when he took a troll bullet and was killed in the gunfight at Pike's Ridge.'

'Murdered,' I corrected.

Slugmarsh nodded slowly. 'He was a good deputy, best I ever—'

'I know,' I broke in. I preferred not to talk about it. It was too painful.

Slugmarsh took a deep breath. 'Noose and his cronies came out of nowhere that morning.'

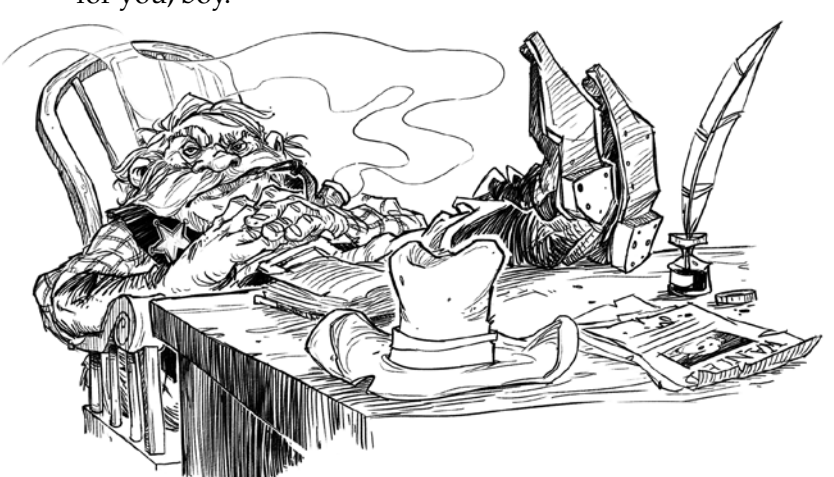
'I heard Pa shouted for cover. It wasn't there. He was let down.'

Taking a swig from his bottle, Slugmarsh offered it to me but I shook my head impatiently, waiting for his response.

'Boy, you got no idea what it was like. We were caught in a storm of bullets. Noose was like some trigger-happy demon. It was chaos. Couldn't hear yourself think above the noise of the shooting!'

I dropped my head. I was suddenly aware of the sound of grit chafing the window as a gust of wind kicked up dust from the street.

Slugmarsh stroked his beard. 'I'm starting to fear for you, boy.'



'Fear – why?'

'I'm beginning to think you might be serious about this. And cos I gotta hunch you're after more than just the bounty.'

'Noose Wormworx killed my father,' I choked, blinking away the swell of a tear. 'He should be brought to justice.'

Slugmarsh reached over to pat a huge awkward hand on my shoulder. 'Course he should, boy, but you think your pa would want you to follow him into the ground tryin'? Heck, you're only a kid.'

I felt my face redden. 'I'm not a kid. Besides, I've made up my mind.'

'Then you're crazy!' Slugmarsh boomed, wheezing and coughing at his outburst. 'There isn't a posse on the rock stupid enough to ride out after that killer.'

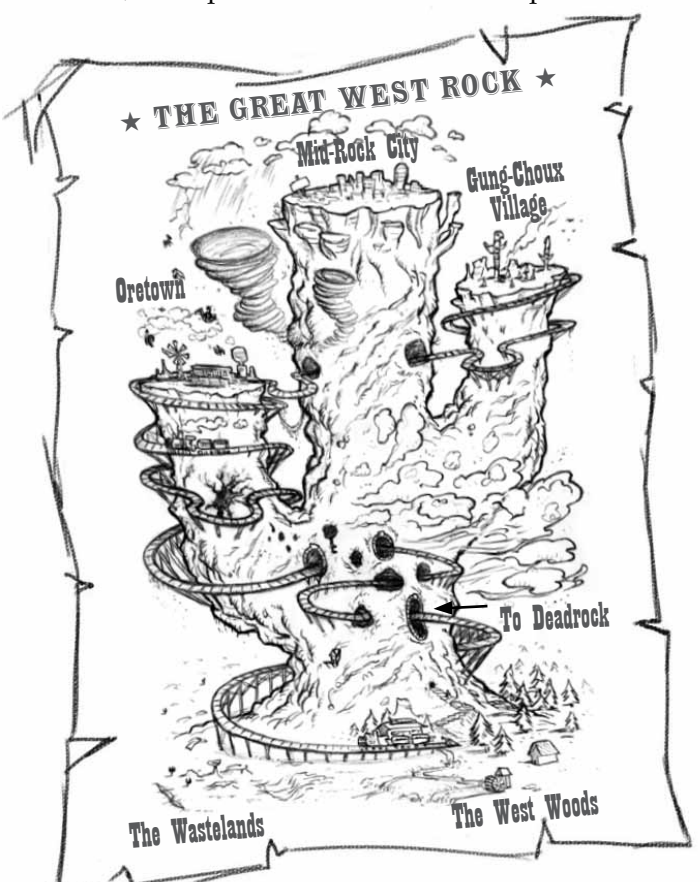
Clenching my teeth, I rolled up the poster. 'I'd have preferred not to ask for help, but I figured as sheriff you might've at least pretended to be interested.' I made for the door. 'I'll see myself out.'

Slugmarsh put his head in his hands and breathed a long sigh. 'Spirit's sake, boy. What is it you wanna know?'

I stopped. 'Where is he?'

'Your guess is as good as mine.'

Reaching into a drawer, Slugmarsh pulled out a side-view map of the Great West Rock. He ran a dirty finger over the cactus-shaped world with its thick trunk and arms, on top of which were marked place names:



Oretown, Mid-Rock City, Gung-Choux Village and others, all connected by a rail track that coiled around the outside of the whole of the West Rock. But it was on a dark cave in the middle of the trunk that his finger drummed.

'He's most likely holed up in the underground city of Deadrock. The place is full of outlaws. S'no place for an elf kid, though. If those snake-belly trolls get hold of you, they'll chew you up like bacca weed and leave you for dead. You ever seen a snake-bellied troll?'

'Not yet.'

'They are the evilest kind of troll you could meet and they ain't called snake-bellies for nothing; they got three, four, sometimes more real snakes pouring out of their guts, tongues flickering. Some folks say the snakes help the troll sense their surroundings, 's'why trolls can live in dark underground cities like Deadrock.'

I shuddered. I didn't need reminding how gruesome snake-bellies were; Pa had told me stories about them when I was a kid and given me nightmares. But I was determined not to let it put me off going after one.

‘My pa told me the sheriff keeps records on all of West Rock’s outlaws. I’d like to borrow whatever you have on Noose.’

‘You think I’m running a library, kid. I can’t let confidential records leave this office.’

Suddenly, there was a slight tremor. I noticed the whiskey swill in the sheriff’s bottle. The second tremor made the floor jerk slightly. We stared at each other.

‘Rock quake,’ I breathed.

Rock quakes shook the town every so often but were becoming more frequent. Usually they were too small to do any serious structural damage, but there was always the worry that the big one was just around the corner. My Grandma, Yenene, is always talking about how the tremors are signs that the rock spirits are angry at the way folks live their lives nowadays. And I usually try to change the subject before she starts going on about the good ol’ days when she was a child growing up in Gung-Choux village. I’d overhearda couple of alchemists from Mid-Rock City discussing that they weren’t tremors at all but the land sinking because of the mines inside the West Rock.

'Look, kid, I wish you luck, but I can't let you take those pap—'

Another big tremor hurled us both off our feet. Slugmarsh let out a yell as he rolled across the floor, crashing into the iron bars of the corner cell.

The goblin was flung out of his bunk, landing inches away from the sheriff. Chairs toppled, bottles smashed, a filing cabinet crashed onto its side and its drawers opened, spilling out files. I flung my arms over my head to avoid injury.

'Moonshine,' I breathed. My horse was tied up outside, storms and quakes didn't usually spook her, though if a lump of roof landed on her . . .

Then, as suddenly as they had come, the tremors ceased.

I glanced over to the cell and gasped in shock. The goblin was wide-awake and in a calculated move, he let fly with his long wiry tail; it shot down the sprawled Sheriff's flank to his holster, coiling round the butt of the gun.

'Behind you!' I yelled, but the warning was hopelessly late. In a second, the goblin was armed and grinning.

Slugmarsh struggled to haul himself to his knees, but the six-shot blaster was already aimed at his head.

'Hands in the sky, Marshall!' the goblin shrieked, his rasping voice tinged with nervous excitement. Slugmarsh snarled at him but slowly raised his hands.

Next thing, the goblin swung the gun at me and for the second time that morning I stared into the barrel of the six-shot blaster. The goblin's eyes bulged beneath thin pointed ears. 'You, kid, get the keys from fatso's belt here and unlock the door real slow now, nothing fancy.'

Goblins are notoriously trigger-happy so I turned the key in the lock, real slow.

'Now, back off.' The goblin shoved open the cell door. 'I've had me a swell time, Sheriff,' he hissed, 'but I'm checkin' out. You'll understand if I don't leave a tip.'

'Your trial's in the morning. You could walk free. If you do something stupid they'll hang you.'

The goblin laughed like a Wasteland hyena. 'Since when did a goblin get a fair trial? You know as well as I do, they'll probably hang me anyways. No, I'll take my chances. Now, you two, in the cell. Move!'



It was then I noticed that the goblin's tail lay between the half-open cell door and the door jamb. I lashed out a foot, kicking the cell door shut on the goblin's tail.

The pain must have been excruciating, judging by the wail he let out. Arms flailing to open the door and free his trapped limb, the goblin dropped the gun and I sprang on it like a pouncing wood panther. Now it was my turn. In seconds, I was back on my feet and, trembling, I pointed the gun at the goblin.

Slugmarsh smacked both thighs. 'Quick thinking, boy.' He held out his hand. 'Now, give me the gun.'

But I froze, my gaze darting between the two of them.

The goblin's eyes rolled in their sockets. 'Yeagggh! Stupid kid!' he cried, nursing his swelling tail. 'Give me that gun.'

I stepped back. 'Come any closer and I'll shoot!'

Face contorting, the goblin moved slowly towards me. 'You're bluffing, kid. You don't have the guts.'

I fired a round at the goblin's scrawny feet. 'Back off!'

The goblin shrieked, stumbling backwards. 'Crazy

kid! You could've blown my foot off.'

Slugmarsh cleared his throat loudly. 'I'll take it from here – before somebody gets shot.'

But I shook my head.

'I ain't asking. That's an order, boy.'

The goblin hissed at me. 'Hey, kid, I couldn't help overhearing your talk about Noose Wormworx. I could take you to Deadrock, maybe even help you find Noose – goblin's got no love for snake-bellies, you oughta know that.'

'I don't think so, I work on my own.'

I herded him back into his cage, then pointed the gun at the sheriff.

'Wha . . . you gone crazy?'

The poster of Noose had fallen off the table during the tremor and now sneered up at me. I swept my fringe up under my hat. 'No. It's just, like I said, I'd really appreciate borrowing those records.'

Slugmarsh's forehead and neck veins bulged to the point where I thought they might explode. He puffed and gasped like an old steam engine for a while then, still huffing, began poking through the strewn leather-bound files on the floor with his foot. Growling, he

kicked one of the thicker files over to me. 'Now, give me that gun.'

I lifted the file and blew off the dust. Then, grinning, I backed slowly towards the door, carefully stepping over fallen chairs and broken glass. At the last minute, I tossed the gun to Slugmarsh. 'Thanks.'

I ran out into the beginnings of a dust storm and untied Moonshine.

'What's going on? I heard a gunshot and screaming,' she cried, her nostrils flaring. 'I thought you'd been shot!'

'Shhh! Take it easy, Shy. Sheriff just wasn't too keen on me disturbing his nap.' I noticed her eyes were like saucers and I stroked her neck. 'You OK, that was a pretty big quake?'

'I'm fine.'

I checked the sky and frowned. 'Looks like a storm's brewing. Can't risk flying, you OK to ride back to the ranch?'

'Long as you tell me what's going on . . .' her voice trailed off as a couple of men rolled out of the nearby saloon and began staggering towards us. Men folk don't hold with talking to animals, saying that

the Great Spirit created beasts to be submissive to folk and that they should be silent. But I am half elf, and elf folk have a strong bond with all animals. Critter chatter, as it's known on the rock, comes as naturally to me as eating and breathing.

My pa was human and my mother, who was a green-skinned elf, died when I was a baby. Since Pa's death, my grandma, Yenene, had looked after me. She was a she-elf with wizened, yellowish-green skin, rougher than ogre hide. She often told me that Pa knew well the perils of being a deputy but that upholding the law had been his passion and that there was no point getting all swollen with hatred about him being taken. My brown hair favours Pa, though it doesn't hide my long pointed elf ears. Pa punched a man once for calling me a half-breed.

'What kind of business you got with the sheriff? Are you in some sort of trouble?' Moonshine asked when the men from the saloon had gone.

I put Noose's file in the saddle pouch. 'I'll tell you on the ride back to the ranch,' I whispered, 'but only cos a sky cowboy should never keep a secret from his

horse, and because I trust you not to breathe a whinny about this.'

Moonshine lowered herself onto her front legs and I swung into the saddle. Then we set off at a lope through the empty streets of Oretown, riding out towards the rock's edge.

