

The Contingency of Odd Things

By Eygló Karlsdóttir

We're not like other creatures. We're not like you. We huddle. We live hidden in the shadows because showing our faces usually means trouble. The human beings that have met us usually call us The Thin People. I guess it isn't wrong exactly. We are thin and a bit taller than the average human, most of us anyway, though some are smaller, a lot smaller. And we're not all thin, we're not all tall, but we are all hidden. So I prefer Kobold, because that's what we've always called ourselves, or The Hidden People.

They call me Pholl, that's with a hard l. I'm the fixer of the clan. That makes me the only one that goes out into the world on a regular basis. We're mostly self-reliant, you see, but occasionally things need fixing and that's where I come in.

Usually it's an easy job I do for our clan. Usually I don't actually have to do much of anything. But when the cogwheels in the power-engine start to break one after the other it's my job to go out there and find replacements. One cogwheel we can build, but not much more – and we'd

rather go get some from the outside world. It's not our strongest suit to be honest, building things like that.

Let me explain. We're excellent builders, but we are organic builders. We build things driven by the sun, we manipulate plants to effectively do what we need them to, we can mould stones, not with chisels but with our hands, they become like clay.

Look, it's complicated, but we're not good with iron or human engineering. So I get sent to find things and sometimes I come back with stuff we couldn't fathom before we saw them. Like the coffee maker. What a wonderful thing. We have five now and I've been on the lookout for one more, to keep in the greenery, but I don't steal things. I only take them when I know they won't be missed. It's a sixth sense I have, it's why I'm the fixer. And I've brought other things, appreciated things. Though I'm not always sure I'm doing my fellow Kobolds a favour when I bring stuff from the outside world. There was an issue with the CD player and the music labelled AC/DC. A lot of the Kobolds just sat listening all day, did nothing else until they were trained to do two things at the same time. We're generally not good at doing two things at the same time.

The fact is that it's easy to play the hero when all you have to do is go to the nearest waste ground or abandoned home to find things, but when the fixing requires you to get into the house of an engineer and steal all his drawings and notes on how to build a machine we know can cause a lot of harm, that's when things become complicated. But I'm the fixer, so it's my job to fix that too.

It was one of the ancient ones that asked me to do this. She rarely speaks, but sits in her cave on top of the cliff for years on end without saying anything except "thank you" when her dinner is served – and then suddenly she summons me to say that these notes need to be stolen, that whatever this particular engineer is building can't see the light of day. And we all know that when she says something like that it's important. It's not to be taken lightly. Our elders are highly regarded, even the ones that have started to lose focus and take longer to come to a conclusion. There were those who told me to ignore her, said not to listen to her because she was getting senile, but who ignores something like that? It's not possible. She's never been wrong in the past. Never. She's

a true seer. We have one in every generation, but most of them are wrong some of the time.

She on the other hand has never been wrong. Ever. Her accuracy is unheard of amongst us Kobolds. So when she talks, people like me listen and try our best to make sure that whatever it is she fears doesn't come to pass.

Sneaking up in the dead of night is easy, but this is a mission I can't do alone so I have a few of my trusted friends with me. We sling our ways along the walls of the houses, a few sitting on the other's shoulders. Not because our difference in sizes makes the smaller of us slow, but the energy they have to put in to keep up with the rest of us is considerable and we suspect we'll all need our energy for this.

We swing ourselves through the forest of the houses, clinging to fire stairs, and we sway forward using the windows as stepping stones. We don't stop to peek inside. I do that sometimes when I'm alone – sneaking into people's lives is fascinating and they rarely notice – but there's no time for that now and I'm not sure the others would approve.

They aren't used to being out in the city like this. Hödekin seems troubled. He's been out in the world before,

but it's been a while and his hat sits unusually low. I can hardly see his eyes. I know he is not fond of the world of humans. They don't abide by our rules, they lie and they cheat and are generally terrified of anything that is remotely different from themselves. They tend to see demons and devils in us, or wicked creatures they feel they need to banish. It's sad, because I think we could have a mutually very beneficial relationship if that wasn't the case.

Now it seems like the world is going to hell in a handbasket because they are incapable of collaboration, incapable of seeing the truth when it's poking them in the eye, eating at their brain. But if stealing these notes and drawings will give us more time, then we have a mission.

And a mission it is.

We hide ourselves on shaded walls, hide in the dark alleys that only the deranged visit. They look at us as if we're long lost brothers coming to take them away from this place. A man with a needle sticking out of his arm comes at us. His arm is twitching strangely and he is drooling slightly.

"You're a funny fellow," he says, "Do you work out?"

And I nod solemnly at him. I'm more than a meter and a half taller than he is, but in his state that doesn't seem to bother him. Then the chemicals in his blood seem to take over. He stumbles to the ground beside a cardboard box that obviously belongs to the man residing in it, as he grumbles aggressively, and at that the needle man has forgotten all about us.

It's a long walk through the maze of concrete streets and brick houses, but I know exactly where we're going. It's a jungle, a maze, but I have a homing beacon. I know the shade this particular man casts, it's dark and it's ominous and I can feel it from across the city.

The others follow my lead. They are solemn and focused, some are disgruntled, but we do what we need to do as we approach the building the creature we're out to steal from lives in. He is unconscious in his bed, snoring the night away, and for that we are grateful. He's not one of these insomniac people, sitting by the window, staring into the abyss as if it's out to get them. A lot of them do that, you know?

He lives in an apartment so tiny it seems more like a closet than a living space, but he's a small man with little needs and little life outside of his obsession -

which happens to be the very thing we're out to steal away from him. It's likely to ruin his life, and as much as I hate the idea of a brilliant man losing his focus, it's impossible for us to let him continue.

We climb up the building, using windows to balance on, the smaller of us get a lift, except Önnemöpa. She is stubborn and resents getting help and she's extremely capable of helping herself. Despite being the smallest of us she's the first one up, taunting the rest of us for being slow in her austere manner. She gloats, that's what she does, she gloats.

When we've all managed to crawl up the wall we crouch underneath the roof before slowly sneaking in through the window. The house is a medley in colors and shape. It's built on a small space and seems to make perfect use of it with its corners and columns. We climb in through the bathroom window and stand in the bathtub, most of us having to slouch with our heads because there isn't room.

Önnemöpa sneaks out into the living space. It's just one room, kitchen, living room and bedroom all rolled into one, though most of it is filled with books, paper, pens and notebooks. There is a computer standing on a very

cluttered table by the far wall, beside the bed the man is sleeping in.

His name is Alfred.

Hödekin looks at me and shrugs his shoulders. "How do you want to do this?" he asks. I shush him and sign for them to step back into the shadows. All of them but Önnemöpa fade into the wall, can be seen as mere shadows, a clever mural, but nothing more.

I skulk my way to his bed and stand over him. He's sleeping, dreaming of a better world. I can see the images playing in his mind and I know that he's happy, right there in his dream he's happy, but otherwise he's not so happy. He's a miserable sod, actually. I lay my hand on his forehead and stroke it lightly. His slumber changes somewhat, the dream whispers away and I can see his goals clearly.

The greater good, a misdirected attempt to do something for the world, that's what his life is about. I sigh and try to show him the error of his ways, but the elder's directions were clear. I was to take away his drawings, his notes on the thing, otherwise it would be bad, very bad she said, and so I gather my fellow Kobolds around me and while some of us try to show him what he's

doing wrong Önnemöpa and the other small ones try to gather what notes are most important, try to find what it is we need to take with us.

It takes over an hour and during that hour he wakes up not once but twice. It's a harrowing experience. We try to keep him calm, but as he looks at me, he screams. These screams are blood-curdling and very bad for our ears. In the end I usher the others out, tell them to wait for me underneath the roof while I finish with what we came here to do. They've helped. The notes are found, everything has been taken from him.

I sit down by his bed, my long limbs folded under me because there isn't any room. I lean over him and try to look friendly and nice, but there is no way to know how he perceives me. Humans are funny that way. They see the world the way they expect it to be, not the way it is. It's a remarkable ability, but it can be downright devastating as well.

I talk soothingly, hoping he understands me. I tell him why we're here and that I'm sorry we had to do this to him. I know it will ruin his life. It will completely break him because this is something he's been working on for most of his adult life. He has given up family and

friends for this thing and here I am, not only to take it all away from him, to burrow it out of his computer and steal his notes, but also to take away all his major thoughts on the process so that he has no way of continuing. It's brutal, I know that, and I'm trying to make him understand that I wouldn't do it if it wasn't absolutely necessary. I'm not sure why I care so much to be honest.

At first he doesn't appear to understand. He looks at me with quiet fascination and fear but at least his screams become quieter, otherwise I'd risk my brain shattering. Then he starts to understand and as the realisation of what I'm trying to tell him washes over him he just stares at me and it's like something in his mind clicks. As if something in it was broken before and now it fixed itself, or maybe it was all right before and now it broke? I may be the one of the Kobold that is closest to these creatures that are the human beings, but I don't understand their psychology, or their way of existing. I see the world differently than they do, which makes it extremely difficult to communicate with them.

I go silent when I realise he has understood me. My work here is done and now I've surpassed my wildest dreams

of this mission. He understands that what he was doing was bad and not at all what he thought it was. So I stand up to go, to fade into the shadows, out through the glass and into my own world.

But before I manage to do my disappearing act he raises his hand and in a hoarse voice he pleads with me.

"Please take me with you," he says. "Put me to work. I'll die otherwise".

And I know he's right. He'll die from the knowledge of what he has been doing, from the knowledge of what he gave up for his goal that has now been forfeited.

I return to him. Sit down on his bed again, folding my feet slowly. He looks at me in awe.

"We are Kobold," I tell him. "We do not live like you."

"It's fine, use me. I'll do whatever you need me to."

And the possibilities of having someone like him in our midst suddenly come to me. I know a lot of my fellow Kobold won't like it and there will have to be a vote, first with the elders and then if that passes with the rest, but if it works it would be a great thing.

I'm not even sure I can get him there without killing him. He's not like us, his legs don't fold very well and

he won't blend in, though he does in this city, as he is one of them and there are endless possibilities in that.

I find myself contemplating the request. Actually wondering what it would be like to have a living human in our society. But I don't even know how to approach the subject. Do I tell him I'll be back for him if the vote comes through? Do I take him with us now and hope for the best?

The others are waiting underneath the roof as I asked them to. I tell them his wish and in return I get a collective sigh. Except from Hödiken, who just shrugs his shoulders and tells me to take him with us.

"What's the harm?" he says. "It is true that he will not survive long in this world. Maybe he'll do better in ours?"

"Can he cope?" I ask.

"Who knows? But let him try? Maybe he'll become like Old Man Harper, remember him?"

I nod my head but stay quiet. I don't know Old Man Harper's story.

"He used to be human, came to stay and adapted."

This is why Hödiken is priceless. He remembers things the rest of us tend to forget. He has experiences the rest

of us don't know anything about. But as the others don't seem to have anything against it I go into the apartment and tell Alfred to meet us down on the ground.

I've never seen anyone in my life move faster. He was clothed and out the door before I could sneak out through the glass again. When we've climbed down to the ground he's standing there, staring at us with awe, his hand slightly bent in what I think is the wrong way for his kind.

I tell him he needs to keep up. That we travel a bit differently from him, but that he can keep up by watching the walls of the houses and notice the movement in the shades. I promise him that I'll come back for him if he gets lost.

The change in him is sudden and remarkable. I expected a successive change, if any change at all, but the transformation is instantaneous. He's no longer a man with dark hair, slim long nose and long fingers. He's tall, maybe the tallest of us Kobolds and his ears are bigger than mine, his tail has a little fluffy ball at the end and his owl-like face is just like mine. It was such a quick change, from one to the other without me actually being able to really see it. He's just suddenly standing

there, Alfred the Kobold. One of us. There will be no need for votes. He'll be just fine.

We head back, strolling through the maze, Alfred oohing and awing over the sights he sees. "It's so different from what I recall," he keeps shouting at us in a voice that's too loud, but he'll notice soon enough. We don't say anything, just let his amazement inspire us.

And we have one more in our midst. This is how we multiply, apparently. Not with birth, but with rebirth. Desperate creatures become great Kobolds, or so I've been told, and now I have a companion, someone who is as interested in the outside world as I am, someone to join me on my excavations. Someone who is eager to atone for the evil he was about to do, but never got the chance. A lifetime of work went out the window, quite literally.

His story is sad, but he's here now and of all the Kobolds I know, he might be the happiest one. He even made us a coffeemaker for the greenery.

They tell me he didn't take the stairs down, but jumped off the balcony. This was before he transformed and so I gather his old body couldn't deal with the damage. It's a strange world we live in. But he's here now. He's helping and the Elder who sent us on our mission seems

satisfied, at least she hasn't said anything for a good decade now. I hope that's a good thing.