



The Goblin Road  
By J. Parrish Lewis

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## Chapter One

# The Goblin Road

A thick column of smoke rose from the smoldering ruins of Ruarc Sprouls' home, dark against the dawning light in the distance. The thirteen-year old boy watched as he sat cross-legged upon the hill. Grass stains streaked the knees of his pants and along the cuffs of his tunic. From where he sat, the people of his village seemed like tiny insects swarming towards his home. He knew the villagers would offer helping hands, and that his parents would be grateful.

Ruarc shifted in his seat to face the other direction and marveled at the nighttime sky full of stars and the bright face of the moon. A thin line separated the reality from where he came and the one he entered, like a veil between two worlds. He saw where the dawn of his lands collided with the midnight of this unfamiliar territory and knew that none of this would be visible on the other side.

He tucked a few locks of his oak-colored hair behind his ears and pushed his hands deep into the damp grass where the wet chill soothed his palms. The journey ahead of him weighed heavy upon his thoughts and he had to take just a little time for himself: just enough to consider what he faced.

The dark and unknown hill sloped downwards into a forested valley. He traced the contours of the land with his eyes, aware that few others from his village had ever been here, and noticed how moonlight enhanced its beauty. The mountains to each side of the valley reached toward the horizon, each range becoming smaller into the far distance

beyond his sight. The trees wore the moonlight upon their tops as if they coveted light, yet the forest floor darkened underneath the thick canopy.

Ruarc spotted a few black splotches darting across the midnight blue sky, swooping and rising, diving and soaring, hunting food in the night. *Bats*. He imagined how deep within the woods, predators and their prey would likewise be engaged in their nightly game of life and death.

Along the edge of the forest the dense terrain overflowed with wild grasses and thorny bushes. The chaparral extended to the start of a road, a short stretch that tightly hugged the nearby foothills and then disappeared behind the forest. Ruarc stared at the road and rubbed his eyes, then looked again. The Goblin Road. He pushed himself off the ground, wiped his moist palms against his pants, and brushed the wet grass from his clothes.

He saw the bright light of a roadside torch a short walk down the road, beyond the bordering forest that obscured it from view. *Guess I should go*, he thought. *Yeah*. He descended the hills and headed for the Goblin Road, avoiding the forest for now. He could not help but imagine hordes of watching shapes within its borders. Not unfriendly shapes, he hoped.

When the slope leveled out into the bottom of a gully thick with vegetation, he did not pause to reconsider his path. The underused way required him to force his thin body through several gaps in the thorny bushes. Blood trickled from his pricked skin and stained his handmade clothes, yet he pushed ahead locked on his destination. Just before the road began, the ground sloped into a shallow ditch. He stood for a moment, examining the surface of the road at eye level. He pulled off his boots, tossed them into the bushes, and his bare feet squelched into wet earth underfoot. He knew enough to go barefoot and clothed in the simple dirtied tunic and pants of a farmer's child. Anything more

would suggest wealth and draw unwanted attention. He checked his appearance once again to be safe. The frayed pouch, with its handful of food and the few coins he had, he tucked safely into his belt beside a flask of water where it would draw little attention. He felt the slight bulge of coins through the pouch and pressed it flat until the pouch almost blended in with his clothes. He nodded. *Robber goblins won't be interested in me.*

The Goblin Road began at a flat rock wall, as if the wall had been the creator, expelling it forth like a long tongue. He climbed out of the ditch onto the road and immediately magic tingled through his feet like a cold shiver in his body. The dizzying chill flooded his head and everything he saw seemed awash with a blue glow. *No turning back, now.*

The coarse rocks on the road grated against his tender feet even with his first few uncertain steps. He spread his toes in the dirt, pressing his feet harder against the rocks, and bit his lips against the pain. He turned, now facing the rock wall, and reached out to touch its sheer smoothness. He imagined a tunnel inside the face of the wall that would go down into an unfamiliar darkness, somehow more welcoming than the road at his back and all that he already knew about it.

The road behind him had a presence like an eyeless spy at his back. Even the ground seemed alive and watchful. *It's silly. Silly thoughts.* He turned around. *The Goblin Road.* A short distance ahead on the dirt road, a long staff torch delved deep into the earth, and next to it a house-sized troll crouched upon his feet patiently watching him. Ruarc walked slowly to the first gatekeeper knowing he would be meeting more on this path.

Stone and beast: the elements of a troll. A creature of hardened earth and features thick with the coarseness of his beginnings. His imposing build gave Ruarc reason enough to be wary but the glint in the troll's eyes could not be mistaken for anything other than kindness.

Ruarc consulted with his memories of past tales, yet he remained uncertain of whether he felt reassured.

“Ruarc Sprouls,” said the troll, “I have been expecting you.”

Ruarc impulsively stepped backwards at the deep voice of the troll.

“You ... how’d you know my name?” asked Ruarc. “You expected me?”

“I know all that have passed this way, and all that will pass,” said the troll, “and you, Ruarc Sprouls, were always to pass.”

Ruarc’s eyebrows curled at the troll’s statement and a question nearly left his lips, but he stopped himself. He blushed, feeling naïve.

The troll said nothing and examined the young boy who stood less than half the height of the troll. He could not know how different he appeared to the troll from past travelers. Nor could he know the troll felt a tiny sense of familiarity about Ruarc, which he could not quite place.

“I was,” said Ruarc. He felt the truth within him now. “And you’re the gatekeeper, right? One of them anyway?”

“I am Erlwhin,” said the troll, raising a hand at the road to his side, “and yes.”

The troll’s palm lit with a soft green glow at the edge of the road and the ground began to tremble with radiant energy. Ruarc’s eyes were drawn to the spot on the earth where the pulsing energy expanded with volatile speed. He felt a tickling vibration from the ground when the white orb of energy began to pop and spark. Static electricity tingled through Ruarc’s hair as he took a few retreating steps.

A small sprout awakened from the earth with a loud pop: a tiny stem topped by one budding leaf. The plant swiftly grew taller and thicker as branches shot in every direction and leaf after leaf blossomed before Ruarc’s eyes. The glimmering tree erupted in height and arched across the road in a half-circle. Erlwhin himself would be able to stand



underneath the gap. The tree began to twist and the rust-colored wood toughened with knotted bark. The treetop pierced the earth on the other side of the road with a collision strong enough to upset Ruarc's balance.

When the tree settled into stillness, it appeared ancient and majestic with bark hard as petrified wood. Then abruptly, new branches sprouted out near the top of the tree's arch by the dozens and wove together swiftly into a rectangular shape, the flat surface a tight knit of wood.

Glowing letters appeared upon the wood like purposeful fire, forming a sign. Ruarc read the words carefully, feeling like he had heard these phrases before.

#### THE LAWS

As laid down by those who wait

LAW: There is no turning back.

LAW: The toll will be paid.

LAW: All journeys end.

The glow subsided. Ruarc's eyes still saw the light of the letters like an echo in the darkness.

He grimaced and clenched his jaw, staring at the unfamiliar gate. *What have I done?* He drew in a deep breath.

"The way back," said Erlwhin, "is the way forward."

Ruarc looked up into Erlwhin's unblinking eyes. He roughly pinched the back of his neck to relax the tension. The troll remained still in his crouch, unmoving as a mountain. But for the gesture of Erlwhin's spell, Ruarc would have thought he had encountered a statue. Even the words of Erlwhin came with little movement of the troll's mouth.

"I have no choice," agreed Ruarc.

“No. Yet you knew that before you stepped onto the road, didn’t you?”

Ruarc nodded to Erlwhin. Now that it was confirmed that he could not just turn back he exhaled a sharp breath. He had worried that his recollection of this fact might be wrong. For turning back, Ruarc thought, *turning back make me a coward. He deserves better.*

“Your brother waits, beyond the road’s end.”

“You know about Aidan?”

Erlwhin remained still. “Yes.”

“Is he okay?”

“My sight does not reach where he is now,” said Erlwhin, “but I offer advice to those who choose this road. Temper your journey with patience. Haste is not always in one’s favor.”

“But I would—”

“You would be like the bird in flight, if you could, or the lizard upon the rock. Swift, with only your destination in mind. I say again, temper your journey with patience.”

Ruarc turned away from Erlwhin’s eyes, loosened the neck of the pouch tucked into his belt, and fished out a coin, noticing again how few coins he had in the first place. *I hope it’s enough.* He dropped the coin into the small clay pot beside Erlwhin. Hearing its clink inside triggered a flash of recent memory of a time when it was okay to just be a child playing knockstones. He stared blankly at the pot for a moment.

“You may pass,” said Erlwhin, gesturing with a slight nod of his head.

Ruarc walked forward past the troll and as he passed underneath the first gate he reached out to his side to brush his fingertips along the bark of the tree. He felt a light tingling: the remnants of magic’s work.

As he left behind him the first gate of the Goblin Road, a whisper in the night air reached his ears.

“May luck, Ruarc Sprouls,” said Erlwhin, “be your constant

companion.”

Ruarc relaxed his shoulders slightly, took a deep breath, and followed the road into the darkness.

## Chapter Two

### The Burden

Ruarc stepped off the road into a ditch crowded with bushes, well hid from any potential passersby. Dew had soaked the ground, so he patted down lush clumps of ferns until he had enough to make a passable place for rest. He plopped upon his makeshift bed and pulled his feet closer to rub them gently; traces of blood streaked across his palms. He lay on his back, tucking his hands underneath his head, and stared up at the stars. The night air had turned icy and he watched his breath with each exhale swirl before the moon's light.

Then he lost interest in the stars and his eyes glazed over with a flood of memories of yesterday.

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Only hours before—though it seemed longer—Ruarc and his brother Aidan sat on the floor between their beds long after their parents had tucked them in to sleep. On many nights they would lie awake telling each other the stories that they had heard countless times, and often they might throw themselves into the tales as characters. Always they played the heroes regardless of the threat, especially 7-year-old Aidan with his infinite imagination. On this night, however, they were playing their favorite game of knockstones.

Aidan flicked a large white stone toward his brother. The polished

rock rolled across the floor and knocked several stones out of the way with a light clink. A giggle escaped him before he could cup his smiling mouth.

“Shh!” whispered Ruarc. “Not so loud.”

Aidan shrugged as he mischievously grinned. He bobbed his head with a loyal nod.

“Ruarc?”

“Yeah?” whispered Ruarc. He sent a yellow stone skittering under the bed and then smiled with triumph.

“This is fun.”

Ruarc poked his little brother playfully in the shoulder and grabbed a black stone. While he steadied his aim, his attention drifted away when he noticed his brother fixated on something behind Ruarc. The look on Aidan’s face struck him as trance-like and sent a shiver down his back. Aidan’s wide eyes matched his open mouth and briefly Ruarc thought he looked too comical. *He’s trying to pull your leg.*

“Stop fooling,” said Ruarc. But Aidan continued to look, and Ruarc felt compelled to peek over his shoulder and saw the tiny light floating into their room.

The light traveled as if on a soft breeze, enveloped in a warm glow, and altered its direction slightly with each subtle rise and fall. It pulsed within a radiant sphere about the size of the stones in their game.

Aidan tugged on his brother’s arm to get him to look at the light, not realizing that Ruarc already could not peel his eyes away. Ruarc had turned himself fully around though he stayed cross-legged on the floor. The beauty of this glowing light reflected in their half-hypnotized eyes. Ruarc’s mind snapped out of his reverie. *A fairy?*

The light softly hummed as it floated through the air into the center of the room and fell like a snowflake or a stray ember of extinguished fire. When it lit upon the dirt floor, the ground around it

began to grow black with heat. The blackness spread out in an expanding circle around the light, quickly coming closer to the boys. They scuttled back toward the wall.

Before the blackened wood could reach them, the light flared into a churning pillar of fire and a hot wind blew across their faces. The brothers clambered to their feet, and then Ruarc pushed Aidan away from the blaze.

The fire rose in a column nearing the ceiling, which quickly darkened in a jagged circle above them. It crackled and roared; Ruarc thought there was a lion-like quality to the timbre.

“Get back!” Ruarc shouted. Aidan scrambled underneath his bed, coming out the other side, and tucked himself into the corner of their room while Ruarc stared at the fire slack-jawed and bewildered.

He heard his parents’ feet hit the ground in the next room even over the bellowing flames. The fire tapered until it reformed into the vague shape of a man, a faceless man, all energy within a churning chaos of light and heat. His father shouted something indecipherable and Ruarc heard him run to their room to appear at their doorway. The fiery creature stood between Ruarc and his father, who charged at the intruder with an old sword in his hands. Then a dark stream of energy shot out from the creature’s outstretched palm and blasted his father’s chest.

“Da!” shouted Aidan, as their father slammed into the wall and slumped to the ground with a black and smoldering circle in his shirt.

“Stay there, Aidan!” said Ruarc. He did not dare let the terrifying creature out of his sight, even as it twisted its head askew to eyelessly examine him.

In the next room their little brother Sean began to wail and Ruarc heard his mother’s shuffling feet; he imagined her picking up Sean to comfort him. His father lay silent and unmoving. Aidan cringed in the corner and his whimper caught the creature’s interest, for it turned its

head towards the small boy.

Ruarc's eyes combed over the room, looking for something to use against the intruder. *A weapon.* He took quick and wordless inventory of his room, searching his mind for ideas. Then he spied his walking stick jutting out from underneath the bed. He grabbed the stick and swung it at the creature's body, but the flames swiftly consumed it. He dropped the handle from his grip, his hands scalded. What remained of the stick turned to ashes the moment it hit the floor.

The creature pointed another hand at Ruarc, and darkness came out like the extension of smoky tentacles toward a prey, pushing Ruarc hard against the wall. The intruder held Ruarc aloft, the boy's feet kicking in the air, and turned its head again to Aidan in the corner. Keeping a constant grip upon Ruarc, it crossed the room and towered over Aidan; the shivering child made a futile attempt to retreat further into the corner.

When the intruder laid its free hand upon Aidan's shoulder, the boy's scream hit Ruarc like hailstones in his mind. Then a chaotic fire burst from the strange creature and enveloped Aidan until Ruarc could not see anything more than the pillar of fire in his room. It was now twice as large and lighting the roof. Sparks flew everywhere as flaming strands of muddled hay fell around the room; the roof was beginning to collapse in crackling clumps. The fiery column blinked out of existence with a loud pop and a rush of air flooded the vacuum of empty space left behind. No sign remained of the intruder or Aidan, and Ruarc found himself yelling, sounding like a dog lost in the world.

The wood of the walls turned black. The room filled quickly with smoke and Ruarc fell to the floor, finally freed from the creature's grip. He jumped up, starting to cough from the thick soot in the air, and heard a cracking noise from within the walls. *It's going to fall.* He ran to his father and his mother joined them with Sean tucked tightly into her arm.

“Help me,” she said, reaching a hand under one arm of her husband, who was only now beginning to revive. “Let’s get him out. Where’s Aidan?”

Ruarc reached under his father’s other arm and managed a grip behind his back. Together they managed to pull him to his feet, though his body was weak, and their shoulders sagged under his weight.

“He’s gone. That ... thing got him.”

His mother’s eyes scoured every corner of the room, threatening tears until her body shuddered with realization. She gripped her husband tighter as they struggled to carry him out through the hall, and the fire chased them. Ruarc felt the heat at his heels. Sean continued to wail, perhaps in part from his mother’s grip.

They staggered out of the house. Ruarc’s father remained unable to bear much of his own weight. When they had gone far enough from the burning home they lowered him onto the ground and propped his back up against the short wall of rocks surrounding their garden.

Ruarc’s mother stood up to face their home, just as the roof collapsed and the black smoke poured out the windows. The flames consumed the dried hay with a loud crackling finality. “Aidan!” she screamed.

*He’s gone*, thought Ruarc, but he could not bring himself to say it yet. The wet ground soaked his pants at the knees while he examined his father’s dark wound.

Lights flickered in nearby houses across the meadow as the neighbors lit candles and soon rushed out into the night. Ruarc’s mother fell to her knees beside her husband and placed Sean upon his father’s lap. She rushed over to their garden and pulled some herbs free. When she returned, she rubbed the herbs hard between her palms until the juices turned them into a pulpy green mush. She tore her husband’s shirt open and spread the moist herbs onto the scalded black skin.



Ruarc's father laid a hand on his infant child. Sean quieted with the touch of his father's fingers stroking his hair.

"Da," said Ruarc. "I'm sorry." He cupped a hand on the top of his head.

His father managed to shake his head as his wife continued to tend to his wounds. She ripped off her sleeves, tore them into strips and began to bandage the injury, pressing the cloth into the herbal mixture despite her husband's gasps.

"Nothing ... you could have done," said his father.

Ruarc wrinkled his brow at his father's words, feeling a flush of warmth redden his cheeks, and shook his head.

His father pressed a hand onto his bandaged wound as pushed himself upright with his wife's help. His features paled and droplets of sweat covered his face. "He is alive."

"He is—" asked Ruarc. *Alive?*

"He is alive. I know ... of that monster, a firewight of Olcán's ... he is known as Draig."

"Olcán?" Ruarc managed to ask, noticing his mother had paused briefly at the sound of that name. "Olcán sent it?"

Ruarc knew the gruesome stories of Olcán well, though he had pieced most of what he knew about the mysterious magician from snippets of many conversations, by which he had only been an eavesdropper. Years ago he had learned not to ask anymore, for answers remained withheld; it was not necessary for him to know, they said. Even his grandfather said nothing on this one subject. To hear villagers mention Olcán of the West and the murmured alehouse stories that followed, the magician ceased to seem a real person after some time and began to take on the feel of a mythical boogeyman far removed from this land; such a sinister person could not truly exist. His mouth wavered with unspoken fears.

His father leaned back against the wall, grimacing with the effort,

and met Ruarc's gaze with a nod.

"Draig does his will. Little else. He is his darkest creation ... disguised in light ... with the breath of dragon in his form."

Ruarc wiped his eyes and pushed aside fallen locks of hair, which had become damp from sweat. His mother checked her husband's back to be sure the wound had not gone through his body and sighed when she saw it was untouched. Ruarc tightly gripped his father's hand.

"Why would they take him?"

"I don't know. What did you see?"

"He put his hand on him, and it burned, Da," said Ruarc, "and then the fire was everywhere and they were gone."

"Then he has been taken ..." said his father, "... to the mountain."

Ruarc's mother paused her treatment and clutched her husband's shoulder. His father's hand fell away from the bandages revealing blood soaked in the cloth and Ruarc's mother spied it. She lifted the bandages carefully. Worry weighed upon her brow.

"He's hurt," said Ruarc, "worse than you thought?"

Severe burns covered his skin; around the wound his darkened veins spiderwebbed across his chest. The cloth drank up the poisoned crow-black blood. Sean whined, wanting his mother, but his father's caress soothed him again.

"His wound ..." She fell silent, words beyond reach.

"What?" Ruarc asked. He looked into her eyes and wished away the tears waiting.

"Full of poison fire, grim magic. The cure will not be easy," said Ruarc's mother. Her voice wavered.

An elderly neighbor arrived at their side, the first to come, wide-eyed and shivering in the night.

"Mrs. Sprouls!" he said, "What's happened?"

"Please," said Ruarc's mother, "your medicines. I need them. Hurry."

The neighbor nodded and ran back in the direction of his home.

“What about Aidan, Mum?”

Tears fell down her stricken face as she smoothed out the bandages and then caressed her husband’s cheeks with trembling hands. She faced Ruarc and searched for the words, shaking her head even as she spoke.

“Ruarc ... you have to find him.”

“But Da—”

“No. You have to go,” she said. And with a whisper, “you have to go.”

“I—”

He stopped short, recalling the roaring inferno he experienced just before his brother disappeared. Aidan’s scream resounded in him like an echo trapped forever within a cave. There was nothing, nothing he could do but go. He panted heavily in the cold night, trying to catch his breath.

“Ok,” he said, “I will.”

A memory floated through his mind, old words spoken in a soft voice that he remembered well, and his body tingled with a chill. *Now you know which way to go.*

His eyes glazed over with this memory; unconsciously he stiffened his back and stood wordlessly while his mother watched him. He lost himself in the memory. Sometimes memories are the only guidance. That, too, had been drummed into his mind by the soft voice. There was no other option in his mind that would have any chance of successfully getting his brother back. *Now you know which way,* he repeated to himself. *No, I can’t.*

Then he saw his heroic father leap to his feet, ready to pursue Aidan as Ruarc stood willing to go alongside to help, and his mother sent them off with encouraging words. But it wasn’t so. His imagination tortured him. He looked down at his father, who had closed

his eyes in his weak state, and felt his mother's gaze.

"You know where to go, don't you?"

He nodded. "Olcán."

His father groaned again and sighed. He opened his eyes and raised his gaze to his eldest son: his silence a confirmation. Ruarc's mother reached a hand to her son's cheek to wipe aside a tear.

"I don't know if I can do this alone," said Ruarc.

Then his father spoke soft words that mirrored the thought Ruarc did not want to voice, as if by saying it out loud there was no going back.

"Then you know, Ruarc, which way to go."

He studied his father's still face and the wetness of his eyes, letting his gaze fall to the wound on his father's chest. He did not want to say it.

"You know, Ruarc," his father repeated.

"The Goblin Road," said Ruarc. He willed himself to stand straighter. "It's the Goblin Road." His father nodded.

Ruarc's mother looked at her husband and then to her son, struck pale by the words spoken. "No," said his mother, "No."

Ruarc projected what confidence he could gather for this inescapable path his mind charted out for him. The old stories would guide him, for the words of his youth could shape the map inside his head. *You know the way.* His mother started to protest again when her husband interrupted.

"He must. Or Aidan is lost to us."

Ruarc knew his father grew up with the stories of the Goblin Road as well, but his mother was from another village where these tales were meant only to scare children. But she had complete trust in her husband and knew his mind well. Nothing more needed to be said. She reluctantly accepted the plan.

Ruarc would run to their neighbor's and borrow walking clothes

and a pouch from the boy his age. He would ask for a flask of water and tie it onto his belt. They would know, like his parents knew, that it was up to him. He would be able to get some food for the journey and a few coins. He saw his path unfold within his imagination. *The Goblin Road*.

Ruarc leaned over to his father and gently embraced him, taking care not to touch the wound. He kissed Sean on the forehead and his mother in turn kissed him on the cheek.

“You remember everything, don’t you?” she asked.

“By heart.”

With that last promise Ruarc walked off into the night heavy with burden and left behind the comforting presence of his parents.

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The world he had known had fallen away behind him, and it felt like it was gone forever. Ruarc shifted upon the earth, turning onto his side, and finally gave in to sleep’s urging. He fell fast into dreams of strange creatures and a dark forest.

He awoke to a world drenched in gloom, where a heavy greyness dominated the sky instead of the penetrating darkness of night. He did not see the sun, only the suggestion of a stormy day on its way, though the sky seemed to be one unending cloud.

The Goblin Road waited.